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40th ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

THE VIOLENCE PEDDLERS	Michael Gilbert	6
THE CLAY-McBRIDE FEUD	Jay Murphy	28
METAPHOR FOR MURDER	Simon Brett	35
THE BLACK ENIGMA	Maurice Imhoof	58
THE MIRACLE DAY	Ernest Savage	65
CLIFFHANGER	Georgiana Eidukas	95
THE BOY WHO COLLECTED POISONS	Ruth Rendell	102
THE ONLY ONE OF ITS KIND	James Holding	132
THE THEFT OF THE LOPSIDED COBWEB	Edward D. Hoch	140
MYSTERY NEWSLETTER	R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner	86
THE JURY BOX	Jon L. Breen	91

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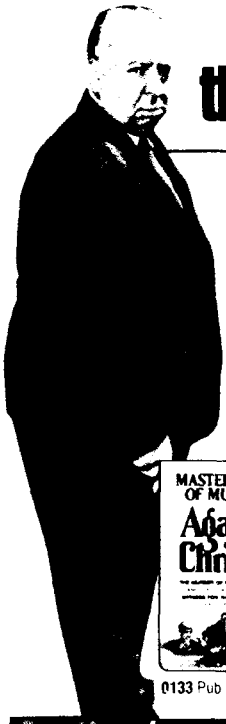

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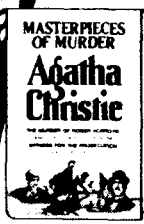

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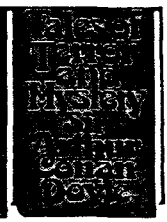

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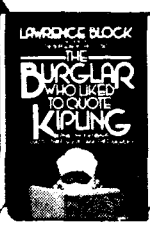

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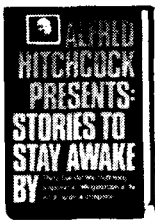

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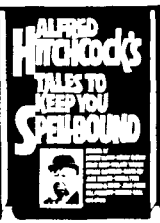

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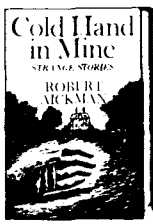

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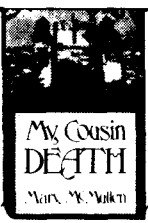

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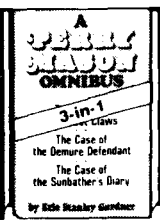

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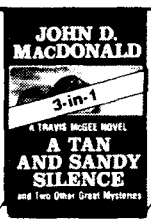

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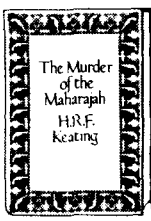

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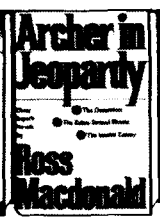

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MICHAEL GILBERT

Wherever Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens go, separately or together, they confront, or are quickly followed by, mystery, menace, mayhem, and even murder. (It's the curse of all famous fictional detectives and counterspies, and of them all, Messrs. Calder and Behrens are the two we would least like to tangle with.) Now, coincidence can sometimes seem to be a governing factor; when that is the case, Mr. Calder and Mr. Behrens don't seem to mind. They are great believers, especially Mr. Calder, in coincidence—and for good reason . . .

THE VIOLENCE PEDDLERS

by MICHAEL GILBERT

It was eleven o'clock on a fine February morning when Mr. Calder's car gave up the struggle and rolled to a halt on the outskirts of Winterbourne Vaisey.

Mr. Calder knew enough about cars to realize that whatever had happened needed expert attention. He was glad that the breakdown had occurred on the outskirts of a sizable village. It looked the sort of place which might boast a garage.

He found both a garage and a helpful mechanic who ran him back in his own car to the stranded vehicle. Mr. Calder sat in the sun, smoked a cigarette, and waited for the verdict.

"It's the petrol pump."

"How long will it take to put it right?"

"Depends. If I can fix it up, maybe two, three hours. If I can't, and you have to have a new pump, maybe two, three days."

Mr. Calder said "Hump," and started rearranging his plans in the

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light of alternative contingencies.

"I'll give you a tow back to the garage. Know more about it when we've got the pump off."

Half an hour later Mr. Calder, attended by his Persian wolfhound Rasselas, was strolling down the main street of the village. The prognosis had been favorable. It seemed he might be able to resume his journey that afternoon. Meanwhile he had a telephone call to make, putting off a lunch appointment with a certain Brigadier Totton, and he had at least three hours to kill.

The delay was annoying, but not serious. For the last few days he had been touring round the home counties, talking to retired Army officers and Colonial policemen. He was engaged in tracing the early careers of the Croft brothers, Martin and Selby, a pair of middle-aged thugs who had been deported, by sea, from Egypt and were on their way to England. What the Home Office wanted was evidence sufficient either to send them on somewhere else, or to put them straight into detention. All that Mr. Calder had discovered so far was that they were a tough and resourceful couple.

A woman from whom he sought directions said, after admiring Rasselas, "There's the Crown Inn, at the end of the High Street. A lot of motorists stop there. Or if you don't mind a bit of a walk, you could take the first lane to the right outside the village, that'll bring you down to the river. There's an old inn there. The Pike and Eels. Boating people and fishermen go there a lot in the summer, but it's quiet at this time of year."

Mr. Calder, who preferred anglers to motorists at any season of the year, thanked the lady and set off down the lane.

It went on for a long way, but at last it emerged on the towpath. The Thames is a quiet river in its upper reaches. Here it was still fairly broad, and was split by an island, which rode like a ship at anchor. Most of it seemed to be occupied by a sprawling and pretentious house, with a big glassed-in balcony looking downstream.

Some millionaire's folly, thought Mr. Calder. Ugly, and out of place in these surroundings. Much more to his taste was the Pike and Eels, a two-storied clapboard building with a long garden which straggled along the river bank. At the far end of the garden a youth was planting something in a leisurely way. Potatoes? Surely too early for potatoes? Might be broad beans. Apart from him the place seemed to be dozing in the sun.

He approached a door which was labeled Public Bar. The notice painted above it in faded letters announced that Samuel Garner

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was licensed to sell Beer Wines and Spirits for Consumption on or off the Premises. The telltale fixed over the door fetched out a stout man in shirtsleeves and braces from the back premises. Mr. Garner himself, no doubt.

"What can we do for you, sir."

"A pint of your best bitter," said Mr. Calder, "and a bowl of water for Rasselas."

"Is that your dog?"

"That's Rasselas." The dog had looked up as Mr. Calder spoke his name. "If he isn't allowed in here, I'll turn him out."

"That's all right, sir. I never mind dogs in here, so long as the other customers don't object. And seeing we haven't got any other customers in the bar right now, they can't very well object, can they?"

"Do you get many people?"

"In the summer, when the boating parties are all up and down the river, we get quite crowded. In winter it's quiet."

Mr. Calder had been aware, for some time, of two things. The first was that they were not, whatever Mr. Garner might say, the only customers. The second was that Mr. Garner was uneasy.

In the far corner of the bar, down a couple of steps, was a door labeled Private Bar. It was a thick door, built to maintain privacy. But he had been picking up a low rumble of dialogue from behind it. One voice, the deeper of the two, seemed to be laying down the law. The second seemed to be protesting, though without much conviction, against having the law laid down.

None of this would have interested Mr. Calder unduly. If people wished to carry on arguments in private bars that was their affair. What intrigued him was the noticeable and growing agitation of the landlord.

Mr. Calder said, "They seem to be having a bit of a debate in there. What is it? Two anglers arguing about who caught the biggest fish last season."

"A friendly argument of that sort, I expect, sir."

"Not so friendly," said Mr. Calder.

There had been a sudden flurry of movement. A crash of a table going over. A rush of footsteps. It sounded as if one of the debaters had made a dash for the door and had been headed off at the last moment.

Mr. Calder was now listening unashamedly.

He heard the second voice saying, "You've got no right—" and

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then, in a tone of panic which came clearly through the closed door, "Don't do it, please," followed by the sound of a blow.

Mr. Calder said, "It sounds to me as if the argument is getting out of hand. Do you think, perhaps, you ought to break it up?"

The landlord leaned forward, with both his arms on the bar, and said, "If I was you, sir, I should just finish up that drink and push off."

Up to that point Mr. Calder had had no intention of interfering. He had enough troubles of his own in the ordinary line of business not to wish to intervene in other people's quarrels. But the threat in the landlord's voice had annoyed him.

He said, "I think I'll have a look. Perhaps I shall have a calming influence on them. I'll tell them the story of the angler who caught Brighton Pier."

"I'm telling you, you can't go in there."

"Oh! Why not?"

"Major Porter won't like it. It's a private room, see. And he's reserved it."

"It's labeled Private Bar. If your pub's open, all the bars in it are open to the public. That's the law."

"Law or no law—" began the landlord. But he got no further, because Mr. Calder had already moved across and opened the door.

There were three men in the Private Bar.

A red-faced, white-mustached military character, dressed in a tight-fitting gray suit, was standing in front of the fireplace, with his thumbs hooked in the armholes of a checked waistcoat. A young man wearing corduroy trousers and a pullover was sitting in a chair. He was sitting with his chin up and his head tilted back, the reason for this uncomfortable position being that the third man, standing behind the chair, had his hand enlaced in the youngster's hair and was pulling his head back over the top rail.

"I don't know who the hell you are," said the red-faced man, "but get the bloody hell out of it, and shut the bloody door."

Mr. Calder said, "Good morning."

"Didn't you hear me? I said get the bloody hell out of it. And I'm not going to say it again."

Mr. Calder said, "I ought to warn you, Major. It is Major Porter, isn't it? The louder you shout, the more angry my dog gets. If he gets really angry, he'll probably eat a bit out of you."

"Naylor. Boot him out. And his dog with him."

Mr. Calder transferred his attention to the man behind the chair.

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During these exchanges he had not moved.

Now he released the boy's hair, and came forward cautiously maneuvering to avoid the legs of a table which had been knocked over.

"Naylor?" said Mr. Calder thoughtfully. "You were in D Division. Got booted out for taking bribes from street bookies. You're getting a bit old for this strongarm stuff, aren't you?".

"Mr. Calder, ennit?"

Having made this discovery, he seemed even less anxious to come forward. He said, "I know this man, sir. He's a—well, he's sort of official, you see."

"I don't care if he's your Aunt Tabitha," said the Major. "He's got no right in here. Remove him."

"The Major's right," said Naylor, sidling up cautiously. "It's a private room. You'd better be off."

"How are you going to make me?" said Mr. Calder genially. "You're much too fat to fight."

"If you're afraid to tackle him alone," said the Major, "I'll give you a hand."

"That you won't," said Mr. Calder. And to Rasselas, "Guard."

The great dog had moved like a shadow on springs and was standing in front of the Major, his lips lifted over long white teeth. Naylor made a tentative lunge at Mr. Calder, who dodged, caught the arm as it came past, and pulled. The combined effort of the lunge and the pull swung Naylor half around. Mr. Calder chopped him, with economical force, at the point where his spine joined his skull. Naylor keeled over, hitting his head on the protruding table leg as he did so.

The Major's hand slid inside his open coat and came out with a gun in it. It was a quick smooth move, but Rasselas moved even more quickly. His teeth sank into the Major's hand. The gun dropped to the floor and Mr. Calder put his foot on it.

The Major had given a brief cry as the teeth went in. Now he stood very still.

Mr. Calder picked up a linen runner from the sideboard, said "Loose" to Rasselas, who let go of the Major's hand. Mr. Calder wrapped the runner round it to stop the spurt of blood. Then he pulled the silk scarf off Naylor's neck as he lay on the floor and tied it firmly round the runner.

While he was doing all this, Mr. Calder was cursing himself, silently but steadily. He had committed an unpardonable offense. He had interfered in something which was not his business. More-

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over, he had made a mess of it. The nursery rule held good. If you make a mess, you clear it up.

He said, "That should hold until you get to the hospital."

The Major still said nothing. It was partly shock, Mr. Calder thought, but there was a lot of hatred in it too.

Mr. Calder said to the landlord, who had at last ventured into the room, "Major Porter has had a severe shock. Take him into the bar and fix him up with a brandy. And when you've done that come back here."

Mr. Garner looked at the man on the floor, looked at the man in the chair, looked at the Major, who still said nothing, and finally looked at Mr. Calder.

"Get on with it," said Mr. Calder impatiently. "There's a lot to do."

He had picked up the gun from the floor and was holding it, loosely wrapped in his handkerchief. The sight of the gun seemed to make up Mr. Garner's mind for him. He said, "Come on, then, Major," and led him out into the public bar.

Mr. Calder turned his attention to the young man, who seemed glued to the chair. He said, "I think you'd better clear off now. Have you got some transport?"

"Y-yes. My moped. It's in the y-yard."

"Then that's all right, isn't it?"

"Don't you want to know about—I mean—about me, and what they were doing."

"If it's important I'll find out later. You'd better go out the back way. That door probably leads into the yard."

"Y-yes. That would be best."

The young man stopped at the door. He seemed to have something on his mind. Then he said, "Thank you," and went out closing the door behind him.

Mr. Garner came back. He said, "That's a nasty wound."

"He shouldn't wave a gun around." Mr. Calder put it carefully in his own pocket. "My dog's funny that way. He doesn't like guns. They make him nervous."

Rasselas rumbled happily.

"It'll have to be seen to."

"Of course. A deep bite like that can be very dangerous. Has the Major got a car?"

"He keeps his car here."

"Keeps it?"

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"He couldn't keep it on the island, could he?"

That made sense. The Major was exactly the sort of man to live in the sort of house Mr. Calder had seen on the island.

"Could you drive it?"

"I expect so."

"Then run him to the nearest hospital. The sooner they get an anti-tetanus injection into him the better. They'll probably want to keep him overnight. Have you got someone who could keep an eye on the place?"

"Ernie can do it."

He went to the door and shouted down the garden. Then he came back and said, "What about him?"

Naylor had turned over and groaned.

"He'll be all right," said Mr. Calder. "Just banged his head as he went down. Might be concussion. Nothing worse."

Mr. Garner said, "Look here. I don't know nothing about you. You come here. Stir up trouble. And now you're giving orders. This is *my* place."

"It's your place," said Mr. Calder softly, "and it's your license. And if anyone found out that you'd allowed Major Porter and his hired thug to use your private bar to bully that young man, and if they knew that the Major was carrying a gun, and had drawn it, and threatened a member of the public with it, then I think you might say goodbye to that license."

Mr. Garner stood for a moment, in silence. Then he said, "All right. We'll do it your way."

As soon as Mr. Garner and the Major had departed, Mr. Calder hoisted Naylor into a chair, fetched the brandy bottle from behind the bar, and poured out a half tumbler full. By the time Naylor had finished it he seemed to be himself again. The only mark on him was a large purpling bruise on the side of his forehead.

Mr. Calder said, "Now, talk."

"I haven't got nothing to say."

"And I haven't got any time to waste," said Mr. Calder. "If you don't talk, I'll get my dog to chew off your fingers. He's had a taste of blood already this morning. He won't need much telling."

"You leave me alone."

"Guard," said Mr. Calder.

Rasselas jumped to his feet.

"All right, all right," said Naylor hastily. "What do you want to know? Good dog. Sit down."

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Rasselas advanced stiff-legged.

"It's all right," said Mr. Calder. "He won't actually start on you until I tell him to. The only thing is, once he does get going, I'm not sure that even I can stop him."

"Then don't let 'im get going. What do you want to know?"

"Just exactly what was going on here this morning."

When the landlord came back he found Mr. Calder playing darts with Ernie. Mr. Calder said, "Your other guest has gone. He won't come back. I've had two pints of beer, and Ernie found me some bread and cheese in the kitchen. Oh, and he's already won two pints off me at darts. If you'll tot it all up, I'll pay you and be off. And Ernie, if you wouldn't mind, I want a word in private with your boss."

Ernie grinned and departed to resume his gardening. He was a simple soul, but threw a good dart.

"What did you tell them at the hospital?"

"I told them what you said. That a man had come in with a dog, and the dog had thought the Major was threatening him, and had bitten him."

"Did you mention my name?"

"I didn't mention it, because I didn't rightly know it. I heard that other man call you Corder, or something like that."

"Right," said Mr. Calder. "Now listen to me. This episode is finished. It's over and done with. Practically, you might say it never happened. If the Major wants to take it any further that's up to him. My guess is he won't."

Here Mr. Calder underestimated Major Porter, but he was not to know this. Back in the village he found that his car was once again in working order. "Temporarily," said the mechanic. "You'll need a new pump soon, but it'll do for the moment." Mr. Calder thanked him, paid him, and drove into Sonning. There was one more loose end to tidy up.

He found the young man, whose name was James Bird, half asleep in a chair in front of the fire in his lodgings. Mr. Calder said, "I got your address from that ape, Naylor. I want a few details from you. I gather that Major Porter is quite a lad. Owns a chain of betting shops and at least three gaming clubs."

"Four, actually. The largest, and the most profitable, is the one on that island."

"And you know all about that because you're his accountant."

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"One of his accountants. He uses several."

"And you ran into a bit of trouble."

"I was a fool. When the Major invited me to come over and have a go I was rather flattered. Normally the only people who get invited to the island are his special friends, and people with a lot of money. I thought I understood the odds. I'd worked out a system."

"Oh, dear."

"All right. You can't kick me any harder than I've been kicking myself. I did make a bit of money—to start with."

"Then you started losing. How much?"

"In the end, just over eight hundred pounds. Of course, I hadn't got it. I gave them an I.O.U."

"And this morning's effort was Major Porter doing a bit of debt collecting?"

"It wasn't just the money. He knew that was safe enough. He's only got to mention the matter to my firm, and I'd have got the sack on the spot. Anyway, I'd made him an offer. Two hundred pounds, every three months, with interest at fifteen percent. I could have managed that. Just."

"And he wouldn't accept it."

"It wasn't the money he was after. He said he'd tear up the I.O.U.s and forget about the debt if I did what he wanted. I look after the accounts for some of his betting shops. I do the annual audit. Well, you can guess."

"He wanted you to fiddle the books for him," said Mr. Calder brutally. "And you said you wouldn't, and he set Naylor onto you."

"He told me what Naylor was going to do. He said Naylor would knock out two or three of my teeth and fracture my jaw. I guess he'd have enjoyed watching it. He's that sort of man."

"And if I hadn't turned up, would you have said 'Yes' or 'No.' "

Young Mr. Bird's face was crimson. In the end he said, "I think I might have said 'Yes.' "

"Nasty either way," said Mr. Calder. "Just as well, perhaps, you didn't have to find out, wasn't it?"

Mr. Fortescue, who was the Manager of the Westminster branch of the London and Home Counties Bank, and had a number of other jobs as well, pursed his lips and said, "I am astounded that Calder should have behaved in such a stupid way."

"Yes," said Mr. Behrens.

When Mr. Fortescue was astounded in that tone of voice there

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was little point in arguing with him. "A recruit to the service would have known better than to embroil himself with something which was not his concern."

The events at the Pike and Eels had been reported to him, as a matter of course, by Mr. Calder, though in a much abbreviated version; but Mr. Fortescue had had no difficulty in reading between the lines.

"Up to that point he had been doing some useful work. He had accumulated quite a comprehensive dossier on Martin and Selby Croft. They appear to be a pair of unscrupulous mercenary adventurers with a taste for violence and a flair for keeping out of trouble with the authorities. Brigadier Rooke, who had had them as recruits in their para-corps days, writes"—Mr. Fortescue picked up one of the papers in front of him—" 'They had the making of first class fighting men, but were more trouble than they were worth. The best I can say about them is that they were attached to each other. On one occasion I know of, Martin saved Selby's life at some risk of his own.' Hmph. Major Sholto, who knew them in Rhodesia, says, 'You'd need wheels on your shoes to catch up with that pair.' What a curious expression. I wonder what he meant."

Mr. Behrens, who knew that Mr. Fortescue understood exactly what Major Sholto meant, replied patiently, "He means that you'd have to move very fast to get ahead of them."

"We're ahead of them at this moment. They are docking at Tilbury tomorrow. The Egyptian authorities deported them by the slowest available ship. Which was thoughtful of them."

"Do we know why they were deported?"

"It appears that they shot a taxi driver."

"Fatally?"

"Fortunately for them, a flesh wound only. It involved them in the payment of compensation. They are not short of money."

"They sound like quite a pair."

"They were on the losing side in Tanzania, but removed themselves to America in time to avoid any unpleasant consequences. They lasted there for eighteen months, and then were deported on suspicion of being associated with various criminal activities. After that they spent some time in the Caribbean, allegedly running a cocoa plantation. There was some trouble about a labor dispute, and the use of unnecessary violence, and they moved on to Tunisia, where they were associated with the oil industry, although in what capacity I am not clear. Finally they gravitated to Egypt."

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"It's all a bit vague, isn't it?" said Mr. Behrens. "Suspicion of association with criminals. Some trouble or other."

"As I told you, they are experts at avoiding specific charges."

"What are our instructions?"

"To keep an eye on them. To persuade them to behave whilst they are here. And to deport them as soon as they give us the least excuse to do so."

"If they are British, how can we deport them?"

"At some time in their career they acquired Panamanian citizenship."

"It sounds thin to me, but I suppose we could try. What is the immediate plan?"

"I want you to go to Tilbury and talk to them."

"I see," said Mr. Behrens.

"Normally it is the sort of assignment I should have entrusted to Calder, but in his present state of mind there's no saying what he might do. If they made some remark which annoyed him, he'd probably set that dog of his onto them."

"It sounds more like a job for the police."

"They have committed no offense in this country, as yet."

"Let's hope that their first one won't be an aggravated assault—on me."

"I'm sure you'll be able to make suitable arrangements."

"It's a funny thing, Mr. Berrings," said Martin Croft, "how people get ideas about us. They seem to think we're always roaring drunk and dripping with blood, or something like that. What they don't realize is we're just a pair of sober citizens. Isn't that right, Selby?"

"That's right."

The three of them were sitting in a small back room in a dockside pub at Tilbury, a room which Mr. Behrens had hired for the occasion. He said, "You weren't entirely sober that night in Cairo."

"Ah, but we were provoked. Our moral sense was outraged."

"That's right."

"I mean, it's one thing for a taxi driver to offer to sell you his sister. That's fair enough. But when he offers to sell you his mother! Anyone might let fly if they had a proposition like that made to them. You might yourself, Mr. Berrings."

"The situation is unlikely to arise. In any event, it's your intentions for the future, not your past, that I'm here to talk about."

Martin Croft looked at him thoughtfully. Fortyish, Mr. Behrens

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thought. Chunky. His wits about him. His younger brother was a malevolent lump. Both self-confident, with the confidence which came from coping successfully with various violent situations.

"You know," said Martin, "when you invited us in here for a little talk I thought, hullo, he's a copper. Then I thought, no. Can't be. Too old. So perhaps he's a reporter. Wants to buy our life stories. But I shall have to disappoint him."

"Oh, why? You must have had very interesting lives."

"The fact is, we've been paid too much, one way and another, *not* to publish them. It's one of the things I've found out in life, Mr.—"

"Behrens."

"Mr. Berrings. Sometimes you get paid more for not doing things than for doing them. For instance, when Selby and me was in Ame:ica there was this Senator—whatever his name was—we was paid five thousand dollars each for *not* killing him. Which was funny, since we'd no idea of doing anything of the sort."

"Was that why you were deported?"

Martin looked disconcerted for a moment. He said, "Oh, you knew about that did you?"

Selby said abruptly, "Just who are you, Mister?"

"You got something there, Selby. He isn't a copper, he isn't a reporter. So who is he?"

Mr. Behrens said, "I've been sent down by certain people who have an interest in seeing you behave yourselves."

"No one's got the right to put a finger on us. We're clean. Who are these people behind you? What do they want?"

"My instructions come from the Home Office, who are officially concerned with you because you've been the subject of at least one deportation order."

Selby lumbered to his feet. He said, "I've had enough of this bloody monkey-talk."

Martin Croft said, "Lay off, Selby. I want to get to the bottom of this. Why should anyone suppose we're *not* going to behave? Perhaps you can tell me that."

Mr. Behrens took a deep breath. He said, "Your record speaks for itself. You've spent the last twenty years of your life peddling violence—in places where violence was appreciated and paid for. The message I'm trying to get through to you is this: there's no market for it here."

Martin Croft said slowly, "I think you've got a nerve, coming down here, lecturing us, like we was a couple of naughty kids. What would

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you do if I threw you through that window?"

"Is that a threat?"

"Take it any way you like. We've done more than that to people who've annoyed us. Remember that American reporter in Cuba, Selby? We took him by an ankle each and swung him against a tree. They were hours and hours picking his teeth out of the trunk."

Mr. Behrens said, in his gentlest voice, "I quite understand. And now you are threatening me with the same sort of violence."

"I wonder," said Martin, equally softly, "what happens if we say 'yes'." He seemed to be listening. "Got men outside? Come rushing in? Search me and Selby? They won't find a thing."

"It's true you're not carrying guns at this moment," said Mr. Behrens. "But you both own them. Yours, Martin, is a P.38, number RN9688. Selby's is a Mauser. I can't tell you the number, because it's been filed off. The steward who carried them ashore for you has been arrested and charged. Whether he implicates you depends on how much he loves you—or how much you've paid him."

Silence descended again. The brothers seemed to sense, for the first time, something menacing in the spare, grizzled, scholarly man in front of them.

At last Martin said, "Let him say what he likes, you've still got nothing you can pin on us." Selby growled his agreement.

"A little matter of threatening me with violence, wasn't there?"

"Two to one. Who's going to believe you?"

"If it comes to the point," said Mr. Behrens, "I expect they'll believe the tape recorder."

"Are you telling me you've got this place bugged?"

"Naturally. Why do you think I brought you in here?"

Martin got slowly to his feet. He looked at his brother. He said, "We've got work to do, Selby. We're going to take this bloody room to pieces and find that bloody recorder, and break it on this character's head."

"Waste of time," said Mr. Behrens. "Everything's gone straight through on the wire to London. It's probably been typed out in triplicate by now."

"You did that very nicely," said Mr. Fortescue. "I did wonder, for a moment, whether they would take a chance on it, and assault you. In a way that would have suited us very well."

"I was fairly sure they wouldn't," said Mr. Behrens. "They're not young tearabouts. They're middle-aged professionals. Even if they'd

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thought I was bluffing, they wouldn't have taken a chance on it. Incidentally, that steward wouldn't give them away. It wasn't just money. He's afraid of them."

"Thoroughly undesirable customers," said Mr. Fortescue. He sounded as though he was refusing them an overdraft at his Bank.

"What do you plan to do next?"

"Calder has an idea about that."

"I did think," said Mr. Calder, "that it would be a good idea if we put them somewhere where they'd have plenty of opportunities to get involved in trouble. Suppose we let them have a tipoff that Major Porter is looking for a new talent. He sacked a rather ineffective muscleman called Naylor last week, so he's got at least one vacancy on his staff."

Mr. Fortescue thought about it. He said, "If it can be done discreetly, it might work well. We would, at least, know where they are. But I don't want any unnecessary violence."

Mr. Calder promised, meekly, that there would be no unnecessary violence. He knew that the episode of the Pike and Eels was neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Managing matters with discretion took time. Time to get the information, at fourth hand, to the Crofts. Time for them to vet the Major and the Major to vet them. It was on a fine morning in early May that they turned up at the Island Club to be given their instructions by Leo Harris, the Major's Chief of Staff.

"In the ordinary way," he said, "it isn't a hard job. Most of the work's at night, when the tables are going. Perhaps someone loses money and gets a little bit upset about it. Or perhaps they've had too much to drink. Then you have to cool them off."

"Bounce them," said Martin. "That shouldn't be too difficult. What's amusing you Selby?"

"He said, cool them off. All we've got to do is drop 'em in the river, right?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Harris. "For the most part they are thoroughly respectable people. You put them in the motor launch, land them on the bank, and persuade them not to return."

"And that's all there is to it?"

"Not quite. There are the betting shops that have to be looked after. It's a cash trade, so no bad debts to be collected. But it does happen, sometimes, that one of the managers gets ideas. Puts the money in his pocket, not in the books. When the auditors spot anything like that, you and Selby pay the manager a visit—"

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"And hold him upside down until the money runs out of his pockets."

"You've got the idea exactly."

It was nearly a fortnight before they saw the Major, who'd been away on business. When he summoned them to his office, they noticed that his right hand was in a glove. He said to the Crofts, "Sit down. Harris has been giving me a good report of you. You seem to handle the work very competently."

"Well, you see, Major, it's the sort of job we've done in rougher places than this."

"I'm sure the routine work gives you no trouble at all. What I've got for you now is a special job."

Martin looked at him speculatively. He said, "Special job, special pay?"

"Naturally."

"If there's someone you want done, it'll come expensive. Selby and me are aiming to keep our noses clean just now."

"Not someone. Something. There's a dog I want to have destroyed. A dangerous and savage dog. It attacked me the other day."

"Is that why you're wearing that glove?"

"Yes." The Major removed the glove and Martin looked curiously at the hand. The print of Rasselas' teeth showed clearly on the back. "He severed two tendons. I've got some use of the hand back now. But it was painful."

"I'll say. It sounds like the wrong sort of animal to mix with."

"I wasn't suggesting you mix with it. I've been making some inquiries. The animal belongs to a Mr. Calder. He lives in a cottage two miles from the village of Lamperdown in Kent. I suggest—"

"That's all right, Major," said Martin. "Leave all the details to Selby. He's the marksman. Less you know about it the better."

At six o'clock in the morning, three days later, Mr. Behrens' telephone rang in his bedroom at the Old Rectory, Lamperdown. Mr. Behrens sat up in bed, couldn't find his glasses, swore, found his glasses, picked up the receiver and said, "Hullo."

"It's me," said Mr. Calder.

"I guessed as much. What do you want now?"

"A little help," said Mr. Calder. "There's a man holed up in an oak tree on the edge of the wood opposite my front door."

"How do you know?"

"Rasselas spotted him. He refused to let me open the front door,

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and he's been 'pointing' him for the last five minutes."

"But you haven't actually seen him?"

"No. When I used my binoculars, I did think I spotted a slight movement. What I guess he's done is knock a hole in the hollow part of the trunk and fixed his rifle up inside. That would give him a rest for the gun, and good cover."

"He sounds like an old hand," said Mr. Behrens appreciatively.

"That's why you'll need to take him very carefully."

"*I'll* need?"

"Well, I can't come out. They may have the back covered too."

"I haven't had breakfast yet."

"It won't take long," said Mr. Calder. "You know the back path through the wood. All you've got to do is follow it, and you'll come out right behind this joker."

Selby had reconnoitered the place the evening before and had fixed up his hideaway before it was light. He was wearing a camouflage jacket. He was a careful and experienced sniper. The range he had estimated as two hundred yards. The telescopic sight was focused on the front door of the cottage, about eighteen inches above the ground. He was happy to wait. Sooner or later the door would open.

He tensed. The door had swung half open—showing a black gap. Who would fill it first? Man or dog?

The voice behind him said, "Don't turn round too quickly."

Selby froze.

"Leave that rifle exactly where it is and come out. What I've got here is a twenty-bore shotgun. It's got such a comfortable spread that I couldn't possibly miss you. Come out, and stand up."

"I know you," said Selby stupidly.

"We met at Tilbury, and had a short talk. I remember warning you against peddling your brand of violence in this country."

"Violence," said Selby. "Who's talking about violence? I came here to shoot a fox."

"In some parts of the country that's regarded as worse than murder. Have you got a license for that rifle?"

"What's it got to do with you?"

Keep him talking, Selby thought. "Look," he said, "let's be reasonable about this, shall we?"

Get one step closer, then duck under the barrel and collar him round the legs. Would the old coot have the nerve to pull the trigger?

"I didn't mean any harm to you. Right? It's just a job I'm doing

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for a friend. As a matter of fact, it isn't a fox. It's a dog. A nasty dangerous animal."

"I shouldn't say anything to upset him," said Mr. Behrens.

Selby heard a slight sound and swung round.

Rasselas was standing just behind him. His nose was a few inches from Selby's leg, and he was grinning.

"Listen," said Martin Croft. "You've *got* to get him out."

He was trying to speak reasonably, but there was an undercurrent in his voice which Major Porter found disturbing. He had employed rough people before, but never anyone of quite this calibre.

The Major said, "They can't pin anything on him except the license business. It'll only be a fine. I'll see it's paid."

"You don't understand, do you? You're not trying to understand. The way we've always worked is not to get mixed up with the law. Once they convict you of *anything*, you've got a record. They've got your prints. You're pegged."

"Selby ought to have thought of that before he let himself be caught."

"Let himself?" Martin's voice went up. "Let himself nothing. He was doing your dirty work. A private grudge job."

"I chose him because I thought he could do a simple job. Not make a mess of it."

"When you talk like that," said Martin slowly, "I don't like you."

The Major was not a fool. He knew when he had gone too far. He said, "There's no point in our quarreling. That won't get us anywhere. Tell me what you want me to do, and if it's reasonable, I'll do it."

"What you've got to do, is buy Selby out."

"Buy him?"

"That's right. Slip what's necessary to the top policeman or judge, and kill the case."

"You can't do it. Not in this country."

"Let me tell you," said Martin, "I've bought my way out of trouble in every bloody country I've ever operated in. The only difference is, some cost more and some cost less. Don't tell me they're so snooty-nosed in this country they don't know folding money when they see it."

The Major considered the matter. Then he said, "First things first. Your brother's been committed for trial by the Magistrates. They refused him bail. But they don't have the last word. There's an

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appeal to a judge in chambers. We'll do that next Monday. Get the best lawyers—a Q.C. if necessary. It'll take a bit of organizing. We'll have to put up two sureties. You can be one. I'll be the other."

"Now you're talking," said Martin.

"Fortescue doubts if we can hold him," said Mr. Behrens.

Mr. Calder said, "As soon as he gets bail, he and his brother will skip. They've probably got half a dozen different passports, and as many ways out."

"Which is exactly what we want."

"It's not what I want," said Mr. Calder coldly. "I want Major Porter."

"You're taking this very personally."

"You seem to forget that he arranged to have Rasselas murdered."

Later that day he had a word with Superintendent Hadow, with whom he was on friendly terms, having known him when he was attached to the Special Branch.

"Certainly I've heard stories about this club," said Hadow. "Crooked play, and people being roughed up when they wouldn't pay up. The trouble is, nobody's ever been prepared to stand up in court and say so."

"But you'd like to shut the place up?"

"Certainly. Give me an excuse to take away its gaming license, or even its drink license, and it would be dead."

"A bad case of disorderly conduct? Fighting? Use of firearms? Would that do it?"

"If it was reported to us."

"Suppose you actually heard it. You've got two police launches which make regular patrols. Next Monday, suppose one of them puts me quietly on shore at the end of the island? Let's say at half-past eight. Then they both cruise downstream, turn round, and come back, timing their arrival for exactly nine o'clock."

"And you think," said the Superintendent, "that if they did that, they might, at nine o'clock, just by coincidence, hear enough evidence of disorderly conduct to justify them investigating?"

"I'm a great believer in coincidences," said Mr. Calder.

At half-past four on Monday afternoon Martin Croft came out of the High Court, into the Strand. He was accompanied by his solicitor and Mr. Mortleman, Q.C. He said, "Well, what do we do next?"

"Better come back to my Chambers and talk about it," said Mr.

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Mortleman. The Chambers were in Queen Elizabeth Buildings and overlooked the Embankment.

"I've never known an application for bail more strenuously resisted," said Mr. Mortleman. "The charge is trespass when armed with a rifle for which no license had been obtained. In simpler terms, you might call it poaching. A first offense, too. We offer them two sound sureties, who are prepared to deposit the money in court if necessary. If it had been you alone, Mr. Croft, if you'll excuse me saying so, they might have hesitated. You're no longer, I believe, a national of this country, and have no fixed residence here. But Major Porter is quite different. He's a substantial citizen, with a house and a business."

"Then why did the beak say 'No'?"

"He didn't say no. He agreed to adjourn the matter for a week so that the police could complete their inquiries. He didn't like doing it. And I'm quite certain that when we do come up next week he'll grant the application."

"That means Selby's got to stay inside."

"But only for a week."

"As long as that's all it is," said Martin.

When he came out of the building two men were waiting for him. They introduced themselves as Detective Sergeants and invited Martin, very politely, to accompany them back to New Scotland Yard.

"What's it all about?" said Martin.

"Superintendent Knox would like to have a word with you."

"And who the hell is Superintendent Knox?"

"He's in charge of the police proceedings against your brother."

Martin thought about it. It occurred to him that possibly a deal was going to be offered.

Superintendent Knox came straight to the point. He said, "In court this afternoon your counsel informed the judge that the owner of the Island Club, Major Porter, was prepared to stand bail for your brother."

"That's right."

"We thought you ought to know that he's changed his mind."

"He's done *what?*" said Martin, his face going first red and then white.

"The message from the local station simply says that he's withdrawn his offer of bail. We thought you ought to know this, so that you can go down at once and sort it out."

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"I'll sort it out," said Martin thickly. He looked at his watch. If he could find a taxi, he could just make the 7:50 from Paddington station.

On a fine summer evening business started early at the Island Club. When Martin got there just before nine o'clock dusk had fallen. The lights were shining from the glassed-in balcony which looked downstream, and there was already a sizable crowd round the gaming tables.

Martin came storming into the club. Leo Harris took one look at his face, and said, "What's up, Martin? How did it go up in court?"

"Never mind about the bloody court," said Martin. "I want a word with the Major."

"I'm not sure—"

"And I want it *now*."

Harris could see that it was not a moment for argument. He said curtly, "You'll find him in his office," and went back into the gaming room.

Mr. Calder, who had been standing unobtrusively by the door, saw his chance. The moment Harris' back was turned, he slipped into the passageway and followed Martin. As he did so, he looked down at the watch on his wrist. It showed two minutes to nine. The timing could not have been more exact.

As he reached the door of the office he heard the first explosion of anger from Martin and the Major's voice, also raised, in answer.

He opened the door a few inches. The two men in the room were too engrossed to take any notice.

"If the police hadn't blown the gaff, I'd never have known, would I? Or not until next week. Then what was supposed to happen?"

"You're talking nonsense."

"Who am I supposed to believe? Them or you. You double-crossing swine."

"Personally," said Mr. Calder, "I should believe the police. They're much more reliable."

Both men swung round. Mr. Calder had shut the door carefully behind him and was standing there, holding a gun in his gloved right hand.

The Major said, "Who the hell are you? That's my gun. Put it down and get out."

He seemed more angry than frightened.

Mr. Calder said, "We've met before. If I'd brought my dog along,

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I imagine you'd recognize him. He became quite—er—attached to you."

The Major said, "Take the gun from him, Croft. He's not got the guts to use it."

"No?" said Mr. Calder. His head was cocked, and he seemed to be listening. "I shouldn't bank on it." He raised the gun and took careful aim.

The first shot went through the glass of the window overlooking the river. The next shot hit Martin Croft in the upper part of his right arm. The third shot went into the ceiling.

The next moment the whole place seemed to be full of policemen.

"Ah," said Martin. "I've been waiting for you to put in an appearance."

He was propped up in bed, in a private room in the Reading General Infirmary, and looked reasonably comfortable.

"I've brought you some grapes," said Mr. Calder. "And some news. The police are holding Major Porter, on a charge of shooting at you with intent to kill. It's a very serious charge. It's his gun, registered in his name. If there are any prints on it, they'll be his. And they found it in the drawer of his desk."

"Of course they did. I saw you put it there."

"I told them," said Mr. Calder, without taking any notice of this interruption, "that I was a guest at the club. That I happened to be in the corridor, heard the sound of a violent quarrel, followed by shots, and looked in. You were slumped in a chair with the blood dripping down your arm onto the floor. I saw the Major hurriedly stow the gun away in the drawer of his desk. His idea being, no doubt, to hide it before the police burst in."

"And that's your story?"

"That's my story," agreed Mr. Calder. "I'd be interested to know what yours was."

"I haven't told my story yet," said Martin with a grin. "Too shocked to answer any questions. Anyway, as one professional to another, I thought I'd have a word with you first."

"And what made you think that I was a professional?"

"When a man takes care to hit you in the one spot that doesn't signify a lot, *and winks at you when he's doing it*, I say to myself, he's a pro. He's planning a setup. So I wait to see what it is."

Mr. Calder said, "I'm relieved that I didn't misjudge you. Here it is. If you tell the same story as I do, the Major's got no chance. He'll

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get seven to ten years. And I'll get the charge against your brother withdrawn."

"I thought they were all bloody incorruptible."

"So they are. But it's sometimes possible to persuade the authorities that a certain course would be in the public interest."

"You were taking a quite unjustifiable risk," said Mr. Fortescue coldly.

"No risk, really, sir. I understand people like Martin Croft perfectly. We've got a lot in common, actually. Offer him a bargain which looks sensible all round and he'll take it every time. Debit side, a bullet in the arm. Credit, his brother let off the hook. Credit for us, the Major put away for a long stretch."

"What will Martin do when he comes out of hospital?"

"I understand that he and his brother have been offered a job by a gambling syndicate in Mexico. Martin has already accepted. He says he finds England too dangerous."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 572nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The two old men still had keen sight, and bragged of being able to shoot the eyeballs off a squirrel at impossible distances . . .

The author, Jay Murphy, was born in California, grew up in Missouri, Illinois, and Michigan, moved to Arizona after high school, and "then over the years wandered from state to state." She and her husband and their two-year-old son now live in Alaska. In her "around thirty" years she has worked as an art apprentice, a cocktail waitress, a ship's steward, an attendant for mentally retarded adults, and a bartender. Her "main hobby, or obsession, is reading . . . mysteries and detective stories were [her] first great passion." She also "dabbles around a bit with painting and carving, and various artsy-craftsy sorts of things" . . .

THE CLAY-McBRIDE FEUD

by JAY MURPHY

"I swear, Ezra, I don't see how a growed man could never learn no game but checkers in nigh onto eighty years."

"Just go ahead on and move something, will you Jesse? You're just stallin' around 'cause you're losin'."

"The only reason I ever lose," Jesse said with great dignity, "is because I am so bored with this dratted game that I can't hardly see straight, not to mention goin' crazy tryin' to keep my faculties on the ridic'lous job of pushing itty-bitty pieces of plastic around on a old piece of cardboard. Cards, now, cards is a game fittin' for a growed man. If you was only to learn how to play cards, now—"

"Jesse, you know very well that you tried a least a hunnert times to learn me that there pinochle game, and I just can't get aholt of it. Them cards just confuse me. Can't make head or tail of all them

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funny little marks, half of them upside down, which don't make no sense whatsoever, if you was to ask me, and all on a whole *bunch* a old pieces a cardboard."

"Them cards of mine is pure plastic, I'll have you to know, and they cost me a purty penny down to town. The latest and the very best in playin' cards, they done told me, and a fat lot of good they do me, alayin' there arottin' because you're too durn dumb to learn how to play a decent game."

"Just go ahead on and move somethin', will you, Jesse?"

The two old men were bickering over a rickety wooden table set outside a somewhat rundown cabin. It was a grassy, level spot, halfway up the mountain. Birch trees edged the little clearing, making a few nice shadows here and there in the bright autumn sunlight. There was a soft breeze, and the just-turning leaves danced a little bit, and the birds sang a few last defiant songs before winter, and a few late-blooming wild flowers brightened up the thick grass here and there.

It was a beautiful spot, a beautiful day, but since the two old men had spent all their long lives surrounded by such glories, they naturally didn't notice it at all.

"You ought to chop down a couple them trees, Jesse—they're blockin' sight of the road."

Jesse glanced down at the narrow dirt "road" that wound up from the foot of the mountain.

"I've thought on it, but I don't need no firewood right now, and I'm kind of used to them bein' there. 'Sides, they don't block it till it's almost to the slope anyhow, and you couldn't hardly see much more without 'em. What's the matter, Ezra, you afraid the revy-noors are gonna sneak up on you?" He laughed the high thin cackle of an old man.

Both men had ancient squirrel guns leaning up close to them at the table. Ezra fondled his.

"Ain't no revy-noor ever snuck up on me before, and ain't none going to start now."

Jesse snorted. "Ain't no revy-noor *wants* you no more. You ain't made no whiskey in fifteen years."

"Sixteen," Ezra said sadly. "But I made blame good whiskey when I did make her. They was all after me then, Jesse, even you got to admit that."

"Oh, it was fine stuff, Ezra, mighty fine. I allus gave you that. It was smooth, it was, smooth as honey."

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"They was good days, even with the revy-noors, and the feud and all."

"Yup. Good days, Ezra, man's work to be done, 'stead a sittin' 'round like a couple see-nile old fools that got nothin' better to do then push around itty-bitty pieces of plastic . . ."

His voice trailed off in disgust. He stared at the checkerboard, feeling old and weary. Then he shook himself and glared at Ezra.

"Well, get on with it then, move something in this here dumb game. Might as well get it done with so we can play another one."

He cackled his old laugh again, but it had a touch of bitterness in it, or maybe it was just a shade of sorrow. But Ezra seemed to be caught up in his nostalgia. He stared blankly, yearningly, at the old dirt path, as though if he concentrated hard enough, a flock of revy-noors would appear, breathing fire and brimstone and governmental wrath, and the great battle between individual freedoms and mass regulations would happily commence again, creating new material for folk songs and legends—fun to be had by all, and a purpose for living, just like frosting on the cake.

Jesse was about to snarl at him impatiently when Ezra suddenly straightened and stiffened. His eyes focused and his long thin nose seemed to quiver. He looked like an old bluetick that's caught an unexpected scent.

"There's somebody down there on the road, Jesse," he whispered, his hands reflexively gripping his old rifle. Jesse's head whipped around, his hands, too, reaching out for his weapon, the symbol and security of his long life.

"Who do you reckon it is?" He also whispered, although the figure on the path was still a good quarter mile away.

"Stranger," said Ezra, which was enough. They both seemed to crouch slightly, both old noses now twitching, as if they could smell out what kind of strange beast this was approaching their stronghold. They both still had keen sight, and bragged of being able to shoot the eyeballs off a squirrel at impossible distances. Their sharp old eyes were now bright with excitement under their battered felt hats, and they looked enough alike to be twins, although Jesse was a little taller and leaner.

"Revy-noors, do you reckon?" Ezra had the hopeful sound of a child on Christmas Eve, fingering a brightly wrapped package.

"Naw," said Jesse, callously stomping on a dream, "they know there ain't no whiskey-makin' up here no more."

"Who, then?"

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"Prob'ly just some dad-burned fool peddler." Jesse was the more realistic of the two, and the bright excitement was already fading from his eyes.

"He ain't carryin' nothin'. Peddler always carries something." Ezra wasn't about to give up so easily.

"Some dad-burned fool that lost his way." Jesse set his rifle aside again.

"Ain't no way no one could lose his way up here," Ezra insisted. "The road don't go noplace but here and on up, and there ain't no one up there since old Matty died, and he didn't have no kin neither."

"One a them nature lovers, maybe." Jesse stared intently at the checkerboard to indicate that he had lost all interest in the matter, which wasn't quite true, but he knew it would aggravate Ezra.

"He don't have none of them binoc'lars and stuff all them nature types carry. 'Sides, none of them been back since we run off that last bunch, two, three year ago. Say, you 'spose it could be another one of them reporter fellas?"

Jesse's interest was slightly renewed.

"Comin' up here to ask about the feud again?" he mused. "Seems like we pert' near talked ourselves dry on it the last time. Been a long time since anybody come around about it. I figger they just lost interest."

"It's a famous feud, one of the famousest," Ezra said indignantly. Jesse had obviously commited lèse-majesté.

"Yeah, but the younguns today, they don't care about nothin' like that. They got no respect for the past."

"Well, maybe they ain't all like that. Maybe some of them got better sense. This feller looks purty young, anyhow."

Jesse looked back down at the path. The figure on it was making good time, and obviously was young and vigorous, since at that point he was going almost straight up. Soon they could see that he was a tall young man, dark-haired and clean-shaven.

"Ain't one of those hippie-types, anyhow," said Jesse. Ezra fondled his squirrel gun.

"Well, wherever he's headed for he's got to go by here an' we can get a look at him and ask his business. Don't see too many younguns around these parts any more. Not since all the kin died off in the feud."

"It don't do no good to dwell on it, Ezra," Jesse said sharply.

"They was good days," Ezra murmured, "good days."

The stranger disappeared at the slope. Ezra turned to watch the

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farther rise of the path where the young man would have to reappear. Jesse fiddled absent-mindedly with the checkers, casting glances at Ezra from under his hat.

"We still ain't finished this game yet," he said. He didn't seem surprised when Ezra didn't answer.

The stranger appeared around the edge of the birches. He stopped, hesitated for a moment, then turned in their direction. He was quite tall and thin, but strong-looking, with broad shoulders. He seemed to be in his middle twenties. He walked slowly toward them, a tentative smile on his face.

"Nice lookin' boy," Ezra said softly.

"Can't go by nobody's looks," Jesse muttered, but he was watching the young man as closely as Ezra.

The stranger stopped about ten feet away from the table. The three of them regarded each other silently for a moment.

"I'm looking for Mr. Jesse Clay."

"That's him," said Ezra, with what Jesse thought was a deplorable lack of caution.

The young man smiled as though he had received good news.

"You one of them reporter fellas?" asked Jesse.

"Well, not exactly, Mr. Clay, although I do work for a magazine in Ohio. My name's Ben Harris."

"Ohio! That's a far piece to come just to hear about a old feud."

"Well, sir, I didn't exactly come about the feud, or only partly. I mean, it was reading an old article about the Clay-McBride feud, and how it was over, that got me to thinking that—"

"Over? Who said it was over?" Ezra snapped.

"Why, the article in *People's News*, sir. It said the feud ended five years ago, and that Mr. Clay was still alive, so I came here—"

"Just what is your interest in all this, boy?" Jesse interrupted.

"Dang-fool reporters never could get anything right," Ezra muttered.

"Well, sir, in the article it told about your families, and how they were all dead now, and they mentioned a Jason Clay, who'd left here years ago and never came back."

"That's right," Jesse said. "That was my nephew, my youngest brother's boy. One of the last he was, he run off to get away from the feuding, and the next we heard he was drowned in Californy. There's no running far enough if your time's come, I always say. But he was a fine boy. It's a shame to die young far away from home, leavin' no woman nor child behind you to carry on your name."

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The stranger smiled again, showing fine strong teeth.

"But he did have a wife, sir. He got married just three months before he died."

The two old men went completely rigid, staring at him as if he had just announced the impending doom of the world. Startled, he took a step backward. Everyone likes an attentive audience, but the glazed intensity in the old men's eyes was too much of a good thing.

"It can't be true," Jesse whispered. "We'd have heard."

The young man shook his head.

"Jason Clay told his wife about the feud and warned her never to try to get in touch with any of his relatives back here. After he died, she moved to Ohio and went back to using her maiden name."

"What become of her, boy?" Ezra asked.

"She died a year ago."

"Oh." Ezra sat quietly, looking at nothing in particular, and Jesse bowed his head a little.

"So," said Jesse, in a tone of only polite interest, "I s'pose you met her in Ohio and thought there might be some kind of story 'bout her if you could tie it into the feud, so you come here to see us. But we didn't even know her, so—"

"Oh, no, excuse me, sir, it isn't that. You see, she only told me all this right before she died, and what my name really is. Jason Clay was my father. I wanted to surprise you, so I came here—"

The sun flashed on the first rifle barrel to swing up and his words were drowned out by the two explosions, so close together that the sounds overlapped and echoed away together.

"Oh, you surprised me, boy, you surely did."

Ben Clay stood staring down at the body of Ezra.

"You—you killed him!" He stared at Jesse. Ben's face was white with horror and shock.

"Look at your arm, boy." Jesse sounded very tired.

Ben looked at his arm. There were two holes in his shirtsleeve, with powder burns around one.

"My God! He tried to kill me!"

" 'Course he tried to kill you. You're a Clay, ain't you? And he was the last McBride."

"But the feud's over! That article I read said it was over, and the two of you were playing checkers like the best of friends—"

"Ha! Me and Ezra wasn't never friends, and the Clay-McBride feud wasn't never over." He looked thoughtfully at Ezra's body. "I guess it's surely over now, though."

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"I don't understand."

" 'Course you don't. You wasn't brought up here. Them reporters didn't understand neither, or maybe they just thought it would make a better story their way. Two old enemies becomin' friends, spendin' their last years together 'cause they didn't have another soul left in the world to call kin or friend. Guess that part was almost true. Me and Ezra *didn't* have nobody left but each other. Havin' somebody around that you've hated all your life's still less lonesome-like then havin' nobody at all. But I reckon you're too young to understand that yet.

"Me and Ezra, we never called off the feud. We just changed the rules, like. We was gettin' too old to be goin' around tryin' to ambush each other all the time. Ezra had the rheumatism somethin' fierce, and we was both gettin' tired of the whole thing. There wasn't no one left but us, the last Clay and the last McBride. We thought. We was exactly the same age, so we decided that since neither one of us had any kin left to carry on the feud after we was gone, we'd just sit back and see who lived the longest. Whichever outlived the other could sort of consider he'd won the feud. Ezra knew that even if he died first, I'd be close to follow. Didn't much matter either way, with nobody left to care but us. Then you come along. Ezra couldn't sit still for the idea of a *young* Clay left to carry on the name when he was the very last McBride."

Jesse looked at Ben.

"You see now, boy? If Ezra'd a killed you, we'd a been right back where we were."

He looked over at the rickety table. The checkerboard had been knocked over when he lunged for his rifle, and the checkers were scattered in the grass among the wild flowers.

"Sorry, Ezra," he said softly, "guess we finished the last game."

"But still," said Ben, "did you really have to kill him?"

"Don't you understand nothin', boy?" Jesse snapped. "He'd a just kept comin' after you, and comin' after you, till sooner or later he got you. Weren't nothin' could stop Ezra when he had his mind set, nothin' but bein' dead." He sounded proud of his old enemy. " 'Sides," he muttered to himself, "if I'd a had to play one more game of them dratted checkers, I'd likely have shot myself."

"I can see your point, sir, but still—"

"Call me Uncle Jesse. We're kin, ain't we?"

The old man's face brightened.

"Tell me, son, do you play pinochle?"

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a ***NEW*** crime novelet by

SIMON BRETT

Simon Brett has chosen an unusual metaphor for murder—a new industrial product. The anatomy of murder bears a startling resemblance to the anatomy of merchandising—the Need for the Product, the Research and Development, the Timing of its appearance on the Market, and even such considerations as Packaging and Publicity. Mr. Brett takes you, step by step, detail by suspenseful detail, through the planning and execution of murder as an almost commercial product . . .

METAPHOR FOR MURDER

by ***SIMON BRETT***

Murder, like all great enterprises, repays careful planning; and if there was one thing on which Hector Griffiths prided himself, it was his planning ability.

It was his planning ability which had raised him through the jungle of the domestic cleaning-fluids industry to be Product Manager of the GLISS range of indispensable housewives' aids. His marriage to Melissa Wintle, an attractive and rich widow with a teenage daughter, was also a triumph of planning. Even his wife's unfortunate death three years later, caused by asphyxiation from the fumes of a faulty gas heater while he was abroad on business, could be seen as the product of, if not necessarily planning, then at least serendipity.

But no amount of planning could have foreseen that Melissa's will would have left the bulk of her not inconsiderable wealth to Janet, daughter of her first marriage, rather than to Hector, her second husband.

So when, at the age of fifty-two, Hector Griffiths found himself

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reduced to his GLISS salary (generous, but by no means sufficient to maintain those little extras—the flat in Sloane Street, the cottage in Cornwall, the Mercedes, the motorboat—which had become habitual while his wife was alive) and saddled with the responsibility of an unforthcoming, but definitely rich, stepdaughter, he decided it was time to start planning again.

Hector Griffiths shared with Moses, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and other lesser prophets and evangelists the advantage of having written his own Bible. It was a series of notes which he had assembled during the planning build-up to the launch of NEW GREEN GLISS—WITH AMMONIA, and he was not alone in appreciating its worth. No less a person than the company's European Marketing Director (Cleaning Fluids) had congratulated him on the notes' cogency and good sense after hearing Hector use them as the basis of a lecture in the Staff Training Course.

Hector kept the notes, which he had had neatly typed up by his secretary, in a blue plastic display folder, of which favored Management Trainees were occasionally vouchsafed a glimpse. On its title page were two precepts—two precepts which provided a dramatic opening to Hector's lectures and which, he had to admit, were rather well put.

A. Even at the cost of delaying the launch of your product, always allow sufficient time for planning. Impatience breeds error, and error is expensive.

B. Once you have made your major decisions about the product and the timing of its launch, do not indulge in second thoughts. A delayed schedule is also expensive.

A third precept, equally important but unwritten, dictated that before any action was taken on a new product there should be a period of Desk Work, of sitting and thinking, of looking at the project from every angle, of checking as many details as could be checked, generally familiarizing oneself with every aspect of the job in hand. Thinking at this earlier, relaxed stage made it easier to deal with problems that arose later, when time for thought was a luxury and one had to act on impulse.

It was nearly three months after Melissa's death before Hector had time to settle down to the Desk Work for his new project. He had been busy with the European launch of GLISS SCOURING PADS and had also found that clearing a deceased's belongings and

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sorting out a will, even such a simple and unsatisfactory one as Melissa's, took a surprising amount of time. Janet had also needed attention. Her mother's death had taken place at Easter, which meant that the girl had been home from her Yorkshire boarding school. Janet, now a withdrawn fifteen-year-old, had unfortunately been asleep at the time of Melissa's accident, had heard nothing, and so had been unable to save her. Equally unfortunately, from her stepfather's point of view, she had not been in the bathroom with her mother when the gas fumes started to escape, which would have solved his current difficulties before they arose.

But, as Hector always told the eager young men in beige suits and patterned ties on the Staff Training Courses, success rarely comes easily, and the wise manager will distrust the solution that arrives too readily.

No, Janet was still with him, and he did not regret the time he had devoted to her. His plan for her future had not yet crystallized, but, whatever it was to be, prudence dictated that he should take on the role of the solicitous stepfather. Now she was such a wealthy young woman, it made sense that he should earn at least her good will.

He smiled wryly at the thought. Something told him he would require more of her than good will for the occasional handout. The flat in London, the cottage in Cornwall, the motorboat and the Mercedes demanded a less erratic income. He needed permanent control of Janet's money.

But he was jumping to conclusions. He always warned Management Trainees against prejudging issues before they had done their Desk Work.

Hector Griffiths opened the blue folder on his desk. He turned over the page of precepts and looked at the next section.

1. Need for Product (filling market void, increasing brand share)

It took no elaborate research to tell him that the product was needed. Now Melissa was dead, there was a market void, and the product required to fill it was money.

Unwilling to reject too soon any possibility, he gave thought to various methods of money-making. His prospects at GLISS were healthy, but not healthy enough. Even if, when the Marketing Director (U.K.) retired and was replaced by the European Marketing Director (Cleaning Fluids), Hector got the latter's job (which was thought likely), his salary would only rise by some twenty-five percent, far off parity with the wealth he had commanded as Melissa's

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husband. Even a massive coincidence of coronaries among the senior management of GLISS which might catapult Hector to the Managing Director's office would still leave him worse off.

Career prospects outside GLISS, for a man of fifty-two, however good a planner, offered even less. Anyway, Hector didn't want to struggle and graft. What he had had in mind had been a few more years of patronizing his underlings in his present job and then an early, dignified, and leisured retirement, surrounded by all the comforts of Melissa (except for Melissa herself).

So how else did people get money? There was crime, of course—theft, embezzlement, and so on—but Hector thought such practices undignified, risky, and positively immoral.

No, it was obvious that the money to ease his burdens should be Melissa's. Already he felt it was his by right.

But Janet had it.

On the other hand, if Janet died, the trust that administered the money for her would have to be broken, inevitably to the benefit of her only surviving relation, her poor stepfather, desolated by yet another bereavement.

The real product for which there was a market void, and which would undeniably increase Hector Griffiths' brand share, was Janet's death.

2. *Specific Description of Product*

Fifteen-year-old girls rarely die spontaneously, however convenient and public-spirited such an action might be, so it was inevitable that Janet would have to be helped on her way.

It didn't take a lot of Desk Work to reach the conclusion that she would have to be murdered. And following unhappy experiences with the delegation of responsibility over the European launch of GREEN GLISS SCOURING PADS, Hector realized he would have to do the job himself.

3. *Timing of Launch*

This was the crucial factor. How many products, Hector would rhetorically demand of the ardent young men who dreamed of company Cortinas and patio doors, how many products have been condemned to obscurity by too hasty a schedule? Before deciding on the date of your launch, assess the following three points:

A. How soon can the production, publicity, and sales departments make the product a viable commercial proposition?

B. How long will it be before the market forces which revealed a need for the product alter? (N.B. or before a rival concern also notes

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the need and supplies it with their own product?)

C. What special factors does your product have which create special needs in timing? (e.g. You do not launch a tennis shoe cleaner in the winter.)

Hector gave quite a lot of Desk Work to this section. The first question he could not answer until he had done some serious Research and Development into a murder method. That might take time.

But even if the perfect solution came within days, there were many arguments for delaying the launch. The most potent was Melissa's recent death. Though at no point during the police investigation or inquest had the slightest suspicion attached to him, the coincidence of two accidents too close together might prompt unnecessarily scrupulous inquiry. It also made sense that Hector should continue to foster his image of solicitude for his stepdaughter, thus killing the seeds of any subsequent suspicion.

The answer to Question A, therefore, was that the launch should be delayed as long as possible.

But the length of this delay was limited by the answer to Question B. Though with a sedately private matter like the murder of Janet, Hector did not fear, as he would have done in the cutthroat world of cleaning fluids, a rival getting in before him, there was still the strong pressure of market forces. The pittance Melissa had accorded him in her will would maintain his current lifestyle (with a conservative allowance for inflation) for about eighteen months. That set the furthest limit on the launch (though prudence suggested it would look less suspicious if he didn't run right up against bankruptcy).

In answer to Question C (what he humorously referred to, to his Management Trainees, as the "tennis shoe question"), there was a significant special factor. Since Janet was at boarding school in Yorkshire, where his presence would be bound to cause comment, the launch had to be made during the school holidays.

Detailed consideration of these and other factors led him to a date of launch during the summer of the following year, some fifteen months away. It seemed a long time to wait, but, as Hector knew, *Impatience Breeds Error.*

4. *Research and Development of Product* (A. *Theoretical*)

He was able, at his desk, to eliminate a number of possible murder methods. Most of them were disqualified because they failed to meet one important specification: that he should not be implicated in any

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way. Simplified, this meant either (a) that Janet's death should look like an accident, (b) that her stepfather should have a cast-iron alibi for the time of her death, or, preferably, (c) both.

He liked the idea of an accident. Even though he would arrange things so that he had nothing to fear from a murder inquiry, it was better to avoid the whole process. Ideally, he needed an accident which occurred while he was out of the country.

A wry instinct dissuaded him from any plan involving faulty gas heaters. A new product should always be genuinely original.

Hector went through a variety of remotely controlled accidents that could happen to teenage girls, but all seemed to involve faulty machinery and invited uncomfortably close comparisons with gas heaters. He decided he might have to take a more personal role in the project.

But if he had to be there, he was at an immediate disadvantage. Anyone present at a suspicious death becomes a suspected person. What he needed was to be both present and absent at the same time.

But that was impossible. Either he was there or he wasn't. His own physical presence was immovable. The time of the murder was immovable. And the two had to coincide.

Or did they?

It was at this moment that Hector Griffiths had a brainwave. They did sometimes come to him, with varying force, but this one was huge, bigger even, he believed, than his idea for the green tear-off tag on the GLISS TABLE-TOP CLEANER sachets.

He would murder Janet and then change the time of her murder.

It would need a lot of research, a lot of reading of books on forensic medicine, but, just as Hector had known with the green tag, he knew again that he had the right solution.

4. *Research and Development of Product* (B. *Practical*)

One of Hector's favorite sentences from his Staff Training lecture was: "The true Genesis of a product is forged by the R and D boys in the white heat of the laboratory." Previously, he had always spoken it with a degree of wistfulness, aware of the planner's distance from true creativity, but with his new product he experienced the thrill of being the real creator.

He gave himself a month, the month that remained before Janet would return for her summer holidays, and at the end of that time he wanted to know his murder method. There would be time for refinement of details, but it was important to get the main outline firm.

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He made many experiments which gave him the pleasure of research, but not the satisfaction of a solution, before he found the right method.

He found it in Cornwall. Janet had agreed to continue her normal school practice of spending the month of August at the cottage, and early in July, Hector went down for a weekend to see that the place was habitable and to take the motorboat for its first outing of the season.

While Melissa had been alive, the cottage had been used most weekends from Easter onward, and as he cast off his boat from the mooring in front of his cottage and breathed the tangy air, Hector decided to continue the regular visits.

He liked it down there. He liked having the boat to play with, he liked the respect that ownership of the cottage brought him. Commander Donleavy, with whom he drank at theYacht Club, would often look out across the bay to where it perched, a rectangle of white on the cliff, secluded but cunningly modernized, and say, "Damned fine property, that."

The boat was a damned fine property, too, and Hector wasn't going to relinquish either of them. Inevitably, as he powered through the waves, he thought of Melissa. But without emotion, almost without emotion now. Typical of her to make a mistake over the will.

She came to his mind more forcibly as he passed a place where they had made love. During the days of their courtship, when he had realized that her whimsical nature would require a few romantic gestures before she consented to marry him, he had started taking her to unlikely settings for love-making.

The one the boat now chugged past was the unlikeliest of all. It was a hidden cave, only accessible at very low tide. He had found it by accident the first time he had gone out with Melissa in the boat. His inexperience in navigation had brought their vessel dangerously close to some rocks, and as he leaned out to fend off, he had fallen into the sea. To his surprise he had found sand beneath his feet and caught a glimpse of a dark space under an arch of rock.

Melissa had taken over the wheel and he had scrambled back on board, aware that the romantic-lover image he had been fostering was now seriously dented by his incompetence. But the cave he had seen offered a chance for him to redeem himself.

Brusquely ordering Melissa to anchor the boat, he had stripped and jumped back into the icy water. (It was May.) He then swam to the opening he had seen and disappeared under the low arch. He

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soon found himself on a sandy beach in a small cave, eerily lit by reflections of the sun on the water outside.

He had reappeared in the daylight and summoned Melissa imperiously to join him. Enjoying taking orders, she had stripped and swum to the haven, where, on the sand, he had taken her with apparent, but feigned, brutality. When doing the Desk Work on his project for getting married to Melissa, he had analyzed in her taste for Gothic romances an ideal of a dominant, savage lover, and built up the Heathcliff in himself accordingly.

It had worked, too. It was in the cave that she had agreed to marry him. Once the ceremony was achieved, he was able to put aside his Gothic image with relief. Apart from anything else, gestures like the cave episode were very cold.

When, by then safely married, they next went past the cave opening, Melissa had looked at him wistfully, but Hector had pretended not to see. Anyway, there had been no sign of the opening; it was only revealed at the lowest spring tide. Also by then it was high summer and the place stank. The council spoke stoutly of rotting seaweed, while local opinion muttered darkly about a sewage outlet; but, whatever the cause, a pervasively offensive stench earned the place the nickname of "Stinky Cove" and kept trippers away when the weather got hot.

As he steered his boat past the hidden opening and wrinkled his nose involuntarily, all the elements combined in Hector's head, and his murder plan began to form.

4. *Research and Development of Product* (C. *Experimental*)

Commander Donleavy was an inexhaustible source of information about things nautical, and he loved being asked, particularly by someone as ignorantly appreciative as Hector Griffiths. He had no problem explaining to the greenhorn all about the twenty-eight-day cycle of the tides, and referring him to the tide tables, and telling him that yes, of course it would be possible to predict the date of a spring tide a year in advance. Not for the first time he marveled that the government didn't insist on two years in the regular Navy as the minimum qualification for anyone wishing to own a boat.

Still, Griffiths wasn't a bad sort. Generous with the pink gins, anyway. And got that nice cottage over the bay. "Damned fine property, that," said Commander Donleavy, as he was handed another double.

The cycle of the tides did not allow Hector Griffiths to become an "R and D boy" and get back into "the white heat of the laboratory"

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again until his stepdaughter was established in the cottage for her summer holiday. Janet was, he thought, quieter than ever; she seemed to take her mother's death hard. Though not fractious or uncooperative, she seemed listless. Except for a little sketching, she appeared to have no interests, and showed no desire to go anywhere. Better still, she did not seem to have any friends. She wrote duty postcards to two elderly aunts of Melissa in Stockport, but received no mail and made no attempt to make new contacts. All of which was highly satisfactory.

So, on the day of the spring tide, she made no comment on her stepfather's decision to take the boat out, and Hector felt confident that, when he returned, he would still find her stretched lethargically in her mother's armchair.

He anchored the motorboat in shallow water outside the cave entrance, took off his trousers (beneath which he wore swimming trunks), put on rubber shoes, and slipped over the side. The water came just above his knees, and more of the entrance arch was revealed. On his previous visit the tide cannot have been at its very lowest. But the entrance remained well hidden; no one who didn't know exactly where it was would be likely to find it by chance.

He had a flashlight with him, but switched it off once he was inside the cave. The shifting ripples of reflection gave enough light.

It was better than he remembered. The cave was about the size, and somehow had the atmosphere, of a small church. There was a high pile of fallen rock and stones up the altar end, which, together with the stained-glass-window feel of the filtered light, reinforced the image.

But it was an empty church. There was no detritus of beer cans or biscuit packets to suggest that anyone else shared Hector's discovery.

Down the middle of the cave a seeping stream of water traversed the sand. Hector trod up this with heavy footsteps, and watched with pleasure as the marks filled in and became invisible.

The pile of rubble was higher than it had at first appeared. Climbing it was hard, as large stones rocked and smaller ones scuttered out under the weight of his feet. When he stood precariously on the top and looked down fifteen feet to the unmarked sand below, he experienced the sort of triumph that the "R and D boys" must have felt when they arrived at the formula for the original GLISS CLEANING FLUID.

In his pocket he found a paper bag and blew it up. Inflated, it was

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about the size of a human head. He let it bounce gently down to the foot of the rubble pile, and picked up a large stone.

It took three throws before he got his range, but the third stone hit the paper bag right in the middle. The target exploded with a moist thud. Shreds of it lay plastered flat against the damp sand.

Hector Griffiths made more practise throws, then left the cave and went back to get his stepdaughter's lunch.

5. *Packaging (What do you want the product to look like? What does the public want the product to look like?)*

"The appearance of your product is everything," the diligent young men who worried about their first mortgages and second babies would hear. "Packaging can kill a good product and sell a bad one. It can make an original product look dated, and an old one look brand-new."

It could also, Hector Griffiths believed, make the police believe a murder to be an accident and an old corpse to be a slightly newer one.

As with everything, he planned well ahead. The first component in his murder method was generously donated by his proposed victim. Listless and unwilling to go out, Janet asked if he would mind posting her cards to Melissa's aunts in Stockport. She didn't really know why she was writing to them, she added mournfully; they were unlikely ever to meet again now Mummy was dead.

Hector took the cards, but didn't post them. He did not even put stamps on them. You never knew how much postal rates might go up in a year. He put them away in a blue folder.

There wasn't a lot more that could be done at that stage, so he spent the rest of his time in Cornwall being nice to Janet and drinking with Commander Donleavy at the Yacht Club.

He listened to a lot of naval reminiscences and sympathized with the pervading gloom about the way the world was going. He talked about the younger generation. He said he had nothing to complain of with his stepdaughter, except that she was so quiet. He said how he tried to jolly her along, but all she seemed to want to do was mope around the cottage or go off on long walks on her own. Oh, yes, she did sketch a bit. Wasn't that her in a blue smock out by the back door of the cottage? Commander Donleavy looked through his binoculars and said he reckoned it must be—too far to see her clearly, though.

If he was at the Yacht Club in the evening, Hector might draw the Commander's attention to the cottage lights going off as Janet

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went to bed. Always turned in by ten thirty—at least, he couldn't complain about late hours. She was a strange child.

Commander Donleavy laughed and said there was no accounting for the ways of women. Good Lord, within a year that little mouse could have turned into a regular flapper, with boy friends arriving every hour of the day and night.

Hector said he hoped not (without as much vigor as he felt) and laughed (without as much humor as he manifested). So the holidays passed.

When he got back behind his desk at GLISS, he found a letter telling him that an international domestic cleaning exhibition, INTERSAN, would be held in Hamburg from the 9th to the 17th of September the following year.

This was better than he had dared hope. He called in his assistant, a former Management Trainee who was in charge of the undemanding and unexciting GLISS SPOT-REMOVER range and who constantly complained about his lack of responsibility, and asked him to represent the company at the exhibition. Hector knew it was a long way off, but he thought it would give the young man something to look forward to. He was beginning to feel his age, he added tantalizingly, and thought there might be other responsibilities he would soon wish to delegate.

On the 14th of September, Hector Griffiths set aside that day's copy of the "Daily Telegraph." He put it with the postcards in the blue folder.

There was little more he could do now, except to go over his planning in detail and check for flaws. He found none, but he still thought there was something missing. He needed one more element, one clinching piece of evidence. Still, no need to panic; it would come. Just a matter of patient Desk Work. So, while he devoted most of his energies to the forthcoming launch of GLISS HANDY MOPPITS (IDEAL FOR THE KITCHEN, NURSERY OR HANDBAG), he kept a compartment of his mind open to receive another inspiration.

So the months passed. He and Janet spent Christmas quietly in London. To his relief she did not appear to be fulfilling Commander Donleavy's prognostications; if anything, she was quieter than ever. The only change was that she said she hated school, was getting nowhere there, and wanted to leave. Her indulgent stepfather suppressed his glee, thought about the matter seriously, and finally agreed that she should leave at the end of the summer term, then

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join him for August at the cottage, so that they could then decide on her future.

6. *Publicity (make sure everyone knows about your product exactly when* you *want them to.)*

This was the only one of Hector Griffiths' headings which might, while vital for any GLISS product, seem to be less applicable in the case of a murder.

But publicity is not only making things public; it is also keeping things secret until the time is right, and Hector's experience at GLISS had taught him a great deal about this art. Though lacking the glamour of military secrets, cleaning-fluid secrets were still valuable and had been the subjects of espionage. So Hector was trained to keep his plans to himself.

And, anyway, there was going to come a time when publicity of the conventional sort was necessary, indeed essential. If the police never found Janet's body, then the plan was incomplete. Not only might there be difficulties in releasing her money to her stepfather, he might also have to suffer the stigma of suspicion. As with the launching of a product, what was important was the moment of public revelation. And the timing of that, with this product as with any other, Hector would dictate personally.

It was, incidentally, while he was thinking of publicity that he came upon the missing element in his campaign. Some months before the launch of GLISS HANDY MOPPITS (IDEAL FOR THE KITCHEN, NURSERY OR HANDBAG), Hector had to go to his advertising agency to agree to the publicity campaign for the new product. He enjoyed these occasions, because he knew that he, as Product Manager, was completely in command, and loved to see his account executive fawn while he deliberated.

One particular ploy, which gave him a great deal of satisfaction, was simply delaying his verdict. He would look at the artwork, view the television commercial, or listen to the campaign outline, then, after remaining silent for a few minutes, start talking about something completely different. The executive presenting to him, fearful above all else of losing the very lucrative GLISS account, would sweat his way up any conversational alley the Product Manager wished to lead him, until Hector relented and said what he thought.

After seeing the television commercial for GLISS HANDY MOPPITS (IDEAL FOR THE KITCHEN, NURSERY OR HANDBAG), Hector started playing his game and asked what else the executive was working on.

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The young man, a fine sweat lending his brow a satisfying sheen, answered sycophantically. His next big job was for one of the country's biggest confectionery firms, the launch of a brand-new nut-and-nougat sweet—the Nuggy Bar. It was going to be a huge nationwide campaign—newspapers, cinema, television, radio, the lot. The product was already being tested in the Tyne-Tees area. Look, would Mr. Griffiths like to try one? Nice blue and gold wrapper, isn't it?

Yes, go on, try—we've got plenty—the office is full of them.

Well, what did Mr. Griffiths think of it? Pretty revolting? Hmm. Well, never mind. Yes, take one by all means. Well, anyway, whatever Mr. Griffiths thought of them, he was going to be hard put to avoid them. After the launch on the 10th of September he would see them in every shop in the country.

Hector Griffiths glowed inwardly. Yes, of course there was skill and there was planning, but there was also luck. Luck, like the fact that the old GLISS FLOOR POLISH tin had adapted so easily to metric standards. Luck, like suddenly coming across the Nuggy Bar. It was a magnetism for luck that distinguished a great Product Manager from a good Product Manager.

The Nuggy Bar was secure in his pocket. His mind raced on, as he calmly told the account executive that he found the GLISS HANDY MOPPITS (IDEAL FOR THE KITCHEN, NURSERY OR HANDBAG) commercial too flippant, and that it would have to be remade, showing more respect for the product.

7. *Run-up to launch (Attend to details. Check, check, and recheck.)*

Hector Griffiths checked, checked, and rechecked.

In June he went to an unfamiliar boat dealer in North London and bought, for cash, an inflatable dinghy and outboard motor.

The next weekend he went down to Cornwall, and after much consultation with Commander Donleavy bought an identical dinghy and outboard from the boatyard that serviced his motorboat.

Three days later he bought some electrical time-switches in an anonymous Woolworths.

Then, furtively, in a Soho sex shop, he bought an inflatable woman.

In another anonymous Woolworths he bought a pair of rubber gloves.

At work, the GLISS HANDY MOPPITS (IDEAL FOR THE KITCHEN, NURSERY OR HANDBAG) were successfully launched. Hector's assistant, in anticipation of his exciting trip to Hamburg

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for INTERSAN, took his holiday in July. One of his last actions before going away was to prepare the authorization for the continued production of GLISS SPOT-REMOVER. This was the formal notice to the production department which would insure sufficient supplies of the product for November orders. It was one of those boring bits of paperwork that had to be prepared by the individual Product Manager and sent to the overall GLISS Product Manager for signature.

Hector's assistant did it the last thing on the day he left, deposited it in his out-tray, and set off for two weeks in Hunstanton, cheered by the fact that Griffiths had said he was going to take a longer holiday that summer, all of August plus two weeks of September. Another indication, like INTERSAN, that the old man was going to sit back a bit and give others a chance.

So Hector's assistant didn't see the old man in question remove the GLISS SPOT-REMOVER authorization from his out-tray. Nor did he see it burned to nothing in an ashtray in the Sloane Street flat.

Janet left her Yorkshire boarding school as quietly as she had done everything else in her life, and joined her stepfather in London. At the beginning of August they went down to Cornwall.

She remained as withdrawn as ever. Her stepfather encouraged her to keep up her sketching, and to join him in occasional trips in the motorboat or his new rubber dinghy. He spoke with some concern to Commander Donleavy in the Yacht Club about her continuing listlessness. He pointed her out sketching outside the cottage, and the Commander almost saw her figure through his binoculars. Once or twice in the evening Hector commented to the Commander about the early hour at which she switched the lights out.

On the 16th of August, Hector Griffiths went out fishing on his own and unfortunately cut both his hands when a nylon line he was reeling in pulled taut.

That evening he tried to talk to his stepdaughter about her career, but found it hard going. Hadn't she discussed it with friends? With teachers at the school? Wasn't there someone he could phone and talk to about it?

After a lot of probing she did give him the name of her French teacher, who was the only person she seemed to have been even slightly close to at the school. Had she got her phone number? asked Hector. Yes. Would she write it down for him? Here, on this scrap of paper.

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Reluctantly she did. She didn't notice that the scrap of paper was a piece torn from a copy of the "Daily Telegraph." Or that the only printing on it was most of the date—"14th September, 19 . . ."

Her stepfather continued his uphill struggle to cheer her up. Look, here was something he'd been given—a new sort of chocolate bar, nut and nougat, called the Nuggy Bar. Not even on the market yet. Go on, try a bit, have a bite. She demurred, but eventually, just to please him, did take a bite.

She thought it was "pretty revolting."

8. *The Launch*

The spring tide was to be at its lowest at 7:41 p.m. on the 17th of August, but Hector Griffiths didn't mention this when he persuaded his stepdaughter to come out for a trip in the motorboat at half-past six that evening. Janet wasn't keen, nor was she obstructive, so soon the boat, with its rubber dinghy towed behind, was chugging along toward "Stinky Cove." Her stepfather's hands on the wheel wore rubber gloves, to prevent dirt from getting into the wounds made by his fishing line the previous day.

Janet seemed psychologically incapable of enthusiasm for anything, but Hector got very excited when he thought he saw an opening in the rocks. He steered the boat in close and there, sure enough, was an archway. The stench near the rocks was strong enough to deter any but the more ardent speleologist—in fact, there were no other vessels in sight—but Hector still seemed keen to investigate the opening. He anchored the motorboat and urged Janet into the dinghy. They cast off and puttered toward the rocks.

Instructing his stepdaughter to duck, Hector lined the boat up, cut the motor, and waves washed the dinghy through and onto the sand of the hidden cave.

With expressions of wonder Hector stepped out into a shallow stream, gesturing Janet to follow him. She did so with her usual lethargy. Her stepfather pulled the dinghy some way up onto the sand. Crowing with childlike excitement about the discovery they'd made, he suggested exploring. Maybe this little cave led to a bigger one. Wasn't that an opening up there at the top of the pile of rubble? He set out toward it. Without interest, but cooperative to the last, Janet followed.

It was on the precarious top of the pile that Hector Griffiths appeared to lose his balance and fall heavily against his stepdaughter. She fell sideways down the loose surface to the dry sand on the cave floor. Fortunately she fell face down, so she didn't see the practised

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aim of the rock that came flying toward her head.

The damp thud of its impact was similar to the one an earlier missile had made against a paper bag, but louder. The commotion was sufficient to dislodge a shower of small stones from the roof of the cave, which gave very satisfactory credibility to the idea that Janet had been killed by a rockfall.

Hector also found it a source of satisfaction that she had landed away from the stream. When her body was finally discovered, he didn't want her clothes to be soaked through, it must be clear that she had entered the cave in the dinghy—in other words, at the lowest ebb of a spring tide.

Hector stepped carefully down the rubble. Keeping his feet in the stream, he inspected Janet. A little blood from her crushed skull marked the sand. She was undoubtedly dead.

With his gloved hands he slipped the scrap of "Daily Telegraph" with her French teacher's phone number and the opened Nuggy Bar with its blue-and-gold wrapper into Janet's pocket.

He then walked down the stream to the opening, already slightly smaller with the rising tide, waded into the sea, and swam out to the motorboat.

On board he removed a tarpaulin from his second rubber dinghy, attached its painter to the back of the larger boat, and cast it behind. Then he chugged back to his mooring near the cottage, as the tide continued to rise.

9. *The vital first month (Your product is your baby—nurse it gently.)*

Hector Griffiths still had nearly a month of his six-week holiday in Cornwall to go, and he passed it very quietly and peacefully. Much of the time he was at the Yacht Club drinking with Commander Donleavy.

There he would complain to the Commander, and anyone else who happened to be listening, about his stepdaughter's reticence and ask advice on what career he should guide her toward. Now and then at lunchtime he would point out the blue smock-clad figure sitting sketching outside the back door of the cottage. At night he might comment on her early hours as he saw the cottage lights go off.

In the mornings, before he went out, he would check the time-switches and decide whether or not to use the inflatable woman. He didn't want the sketching to become too predictable, so he varied the position of the dummy in its smock and frequently just left it indoors. Once or twice, at dusk, he took it out in the dinghy past

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the harbor and waved to the fishermen on the quay.

At the end of August he posted Janet's cards to Melissa's aunts in Stockport. Their messages had the timeless banality of all postcard communications.

In the first week of September he continued his nautical rounds and awaited the explosion from GLISS.

Because the cottage had no telephone, the explosion, when it came on the 5th of September, was in the form of a telegram. (Hector had kept the sketching dummy out of the way for a few days in anticipation of its arrival.) It was from his assistant, saying a crisis had arisen, and could he ring as soon as possible.

He made the call from the Yacht Club. His assistant was defiantly guilty. Something had gone wrong with the production authorization for GLISS SPOT-REMOVER. The factory hadn't received it and now there would be no stock to meet the November orders.

Hector Griffiths swore—a rare occurrence—and gave his assistant a lavish dressing-down. The young man protested he was sure he had done the paperwork, but received an unsympathetic hearing. Good God, couldn't he be trusted with the simplest responsibility? Well, there was nothing else for it, the assistant would have to go and see all the main buyers and apologize. No, letters wouldn't do, nor would the telephone. GLISS's image for efficiency was at stake and the foul-up had to be explained personally.

But, the young man whimpered, what about his forthcoming trip to INTERSAN in Hamburg?

Oh, no! Hector had forgotten all about that. Well, it was out of the question that his assistant should go now, far too much mopping up to be done. Damn, he'd have to go himself. GLISS must be represented. It was bloody inconvenient, but there it was.

After a few more demoralizing expletives Hector put the phone down and, fuming, joined Commander Donleavy at the bar. Wasn't it bloody typical? he demanded rhetorically, can't trust anyone these days—now he was going to have to cut his holiday short just because of the incompetence of his bloody assistant. Young people had no sense of responsibility.

Commander Donleavy agreed. They should bring back National Service.

Hector made a few more calls to GLISS management people, saying how he was suddenly going to have to rush off to Hamburg. He sounded aggrieved at the change of plan.

On his last day in Cornwall, the 6th of September, he deflated

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the dinghy and the woman. He went a long way out to sea in the motorboat, weighted them with the outboard motor and a few stones, and cast them overboard. The electrical time-switches and the rubber gloves followed.

That evening he said goodbye to Commander Donleavy in the Yacht Club. He confessed to being a little worried about Janet. Whereas previously she had just seemed listless, she now seemed deeply depressed. He didn't like to leave her in the cottage alone, though she spoke of going up to London, but he wasn't sure that he'd feel happier with her there. Still, he had to go on this bloody trip and he couldn't get her to make up her mind about anything . . .

Commander Donleavy opined that women were strange fish.

As he drove the Mercedes up to London on the 7th of September, Hector Griffiths reviewed the necessary actions on his return from Hamburg. Because of the GLISS SPOT-REMOVER crisis, he could legitimately delay going back to Cornwall for a week or two. And since the cottage had no phone and she hadn't contacted him, he'd have to write to Janet. Nice, fatherly, solicitous letters.

Only after he had received no reply to two of these would he start to worry and go down to Cornwall. That would get him past the next low tide when the cave was accessible.

On arriving and finding his letters unopened on the mat, he would first search the cottage for a copy of the "Daily Telegraph" for the 14th of September, and if he found one, destroy it. He would then drive back to London, assuming that he must somehow have missed his stepdaughter there. He would phone her French teacher and Melissa's aunts in Stockport and only after drawing blanks there would he call the police.

When they talked to him, he'd mention Janet's talk of going up to London. He'd also mention her depressed state. He would delay as long as possible mentioning that his rubber dinghy appeared to be missing.

Then, preferably as much as four months after her murder on August 17th, by which time, his reading of forensic medicine told him, it would be difficult to date the death with more than approximate accuracy, he would remember her once mentioning to him a hidden cave she'd found at low tide around "Stinky Cove."

The body would then be discovered.

Because of the lack of accurate timing from its state of decomposition, the police would have to date her death from other clues. The presence of the dinghy and the dryness of her clothes would

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indicate that she had entered the cave at a low spring tide, which at once limited the dates.

Local people would have seen the dinghy, if not the girl, around until shortly before Hector's departure on the 7th of September. But other clues would be found in the girl's pocket. First, a Nuggy Bar, a new nut-and-nougat confection which was not available in the shops until the 10th of September. And, second, a phone number written on a scrap of newspaper dated 14th of September. Since that was the date of a spring tide, the police would have no hesitation in fixing the death of Janet Wintle on the 14th of September.

On which date her stepfather was unexpectedly, through a combination of circumstances he could not have foreseen, in Hamburg at INTERSAN, an international domestic cleaning exhibition.

So Hector Griffiths would have to come to terms with a second accidental death in his immediate family within two years.

And the fact that he would inherit his stepdaughter's not inconsiderable wealth could only be a small compensation to him in his bereavement.

10. *Is your product a success? (Are you sure there's nothing you've forgotten?)*

On the day before he left for Hamburg, Hector Griffiths had a sudden panic. Suppose one of Melissa's aunts in Stockport had died? They were both pretty elderly, and if it had happened, it was the sort of thing Janet would have known about. She'd hardly have sent a postcard to someone who was dead.

He checked by phoning the aunts with some specious inquiry about full names for a form he had to fill in. Both were safely alive. And both had been so glad to get Janet's postcards. When they hadn't heard from her the previous year, they were afraid she had forgotten them. So it was lovely to get the two postcards.

Two postcards? What, they'd got two each?

No, no, that would have been odd. One each, two in all.

Hector breathed again. He thought it fairly unlikely, knowing Janet's unwillingness to go out, that she'd sent any other postcards, but it was nice to be sure.

So everything was happily settled. He could go abroad with a clear conscience.

He couldn't resist calling GLISS to put another rocket under his assistant and check if there was anything else urgent before he went away.

There was a message asking him to call the advertising agency

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about the second wave of television commercials for GLISS HANDY MOPPITS (IDEAL FOR THE KITCHEN, NURSERY OR HANDBAG). He rang through and derived his customary pleasure from patronizing the account executive. Just as he was about to ring off he asked, "All set for the big launch?"

"Big launch?"

"On the tenth. The Nuggy Bar."

"Oh, God. Don't talk to me about Nuggy Bars. I'm up to here with Nuggy Bars. The bloody Product Manager's got cold feet."

"Cold feet?"

"Yes. He's new to the job, worried the product's not going to sell."

"What?"

"They've got the report back from the Tyne-Tees area where they tested it. Apparently forty-seven percent of the samplers thought it was pretty awful."

"So what's going to happen?"

"Bloody Product Manager wants to delay the launch."

"Delay the launch?"

"Yes, delay it or cancel the whole thing. He doesn't know what he wants to do."

"But he can't pull out at this stage. The television time's been contracted for and the newspapers and—"

"He can get out of most of it, if he doesn't mind paying off the contracts. He's stuck with the magazine stuff, because they go to press so far ahead, but he can stop the rest of it. And insofar as he's capable of making a decision, he seems to have decided to stop it. Call came through just before lunch—hold everything—the Nuggy Bar will *not* be launched on the tenth of September!"

The Mercedes had never gone faster than it did on the road down to Cornwall. In spite of the air-conditioning its driver was drenched in sweat.

The motorboat too was urged on at full throttle until it reached "Stinky Cove." Feverishly Hector Griffiths let out the anchor cable, and stripping off his jacket and shoes, plunged into the sea.

The water was low, but not low enough to reveal the opening. Over a week to go to the spring tide. He had to dive repeatedly to locate the arch, and it was only on the third attempt that he managed to force his way under it. Impelled by the waves, he felt his back scraped raw by the rocks. He scrambled up onto the sand.

Inside all seemed dark. He cursed his stupidity in not bringing a flashlight. But, as he lay panting on the sand, he began to distin-

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guish the outlines of the church-like interior. There was just enough glow from the underwater arch to light his mission. Painfully he picked himself up.

As he did so, he became aware of something else. A new stench challenged the old one that gave the cove its name. Gagging, he moved toward its source.

Not daring to look, he felt around in her clothes. It seemed an age before he found her pocket, but at last he had the Nuggy Bar in his hand.

Relief flooded his body and he tottered with weakness. It would be all right. Back through the arch, into the boat, back to London, Hamburg tomorrow. Even if he'd been seen by the locals, it wouldn't matter. The scrap of "Daily Telegraph" and the dry state of Janet's clothes would still fix the date of her death a week ahead. It would all be all right.

He waded back into the cold waves. They were now splashing higher up the sand—the tide was rising. He moved out as far as he could and leaned against the rock above the arch. A deep breath, and he plunged into the water.

First, all he saw was a confusion of spray, then a gleam of diluted daylight ahead; then he felt a searing pain against his back, and as his breath ran out, the glow of daylight dwindled.

The waves had forced him back into the cave.

He tried again and again, but each time it was more difficult. Each time the waves were stronger and he was weaker. He wasn't going to make it. He lay exhausted on the sand.

He tried to think dispassionately, to recapture the coolness of his planning mind, to imagine he was sitting down to the Desk Work on a cleaning-fluid problem.

But the crash of the waves distracted him. The diminishing light distracted him. And, above all, the vile smell of decomposing flesh distracted him.

He controlled his mind sufficiently to work out when the next low tide would be. His best plan was to conserve his strength till then. If he could get back then, there was still a chance of making the flight to Hamburg and appearing at INTERSAN as if nothing had happened.

In fact, that was his only possible course.

Unless . . . He remembered his lie to Janet. Let's climb up the pile of rubble and see if there's an opening at the top. It might lead to another cave. There might be another way out.

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It was worth a try.

He put the Nuggy Bar in his trouser pocket and climbed carefully up the loose pile of rocks. There was now very little light. He felt his way.

At the top he experienced a surge of hope. There was not a solid wall of rock ahead, just more loose stones. Perhaps they blocked another entrance. A passage? Even an old smugglers' tunnel?

He scrabbled away at the rocks, tearing his hands. The little rocks scattered, but the bigger ones were more difficult. He tugged and worried at them.

Suddenly a huge obstruction shifted. Hector jumped back as he heard the ominous roar it started. Stones scurried, pattered, and thudded all around him. He scrambled back down the incline.

The rockfall roared on for a long time and he had to back nearer and nearer the sea. But for the darkness he would have seen Janet's body buried under a ton of rubble.

At last there was silence. Gingerly he moved forward.

A single large lump of rock was suddenly loosed from above. It landed squarely in the middle of his skull, making a damp thud like an exploded paper bag, but louder.

Hector Griffiths fell down on the sand. He died on the 8th of September.

Outside, his motorboat, carelessly moored in his haste, dragged its anchor and started to drift out to sea.

It was four months before the police found Hector Griffiths' body. They were led to it eventually by a reference they found in one of his late wife's diaries, which described a secret cave where they had made love. It was assumed that Griffiths had gone there in his dinghy because of the place's morbidly sentimental associations, been cut off by the rising tide, and killed in a rockfall. His clothes were soaked with salt water because he lay so near the high-tide mark.

It was difficult to date the death exactly after so long, but a check on the tide tables (in which, according to a Commander Donleavy, Griffiths had shown a great interest) made it seem most likely that he had died on the 14th of September. This was confirmed by the presence in his pocket of a Nuggy Bar, a nut-and-nougat confection which was not available in the shops until the 10th of September.

Because the Product Manager of Nuggy Bar, after canceling the product's launch, had suddenly remembered a precept that he'd

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heard in a lecture when he'd been a Management Trainee at GLISS:

Once you have made your major decisions about the product and the timing of its launch, do not indulge in second thoughts.

So he'd rescinded his second thoughts and the campaign had gone ahead as planned. (It may be worth recording that the Nuggy Bar was not a success. The majority of the buying public found it revolting.)

The body of Hector Griffiths' stepdaughter, Janet Wintle, was never found. Which was a pity for two old ladies in Stockport who, under the terms of a trust set up in her mother's will, stood to inherit her not inconsiderable wealth.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 573rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "Whatever it is, it's evil, foul, rotten" . . .

The author, Maurice Imhoof, was forty-nine when he submitted his first story. He is married and has two teenage children, a boy and a girl. By profession he is "an educational planner in the area of English-language teacher training and language planning in developing countries."

Mr. Imhoof makes an interesting comment on writing as an outlet from frustrations: "in the fictional world," he says, "the writer is in absolute control of the situation in a way that one never is in the real world." We wonder: many writers have claimed that their characters often take control of their creators . . .

THE BLACK ENIGMA

by MAURICE IMHOOF

June 10th: The weather's hot. I found some blackberries in the woods. Jimmy Junior helped me make a pie. Our cow Betty's dried up, so there aren't many chores to keep me busy. Just those filthy, hateful chickens.

Jim's been gone three weeks.

This morning when I walked with Blue out through the lower pasture, I almost stepped in this small patch of black guck. Just a little pool of it, not much bigger than a small saucer. It looked kind of like melted tar. I poked a stick into it, and it was very sticky but not very deep. It might be oil. I know there's oil in Southern Indiana but I wonder if there's any in Morgan County?

June 20th: I've told Jimmy Junior not to go into the lower pasture. Today I looked again. The black stuff is about the size of a large

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mixing bowl. It's puffy, like fresh-risen bread dough. It glistens in the sun. I think it's some kind of poison mushroom.

I sold those stupid chickens, all but the two banties that Jimmy Junior likes. Bill Ellis—he's Jim's cousin, I think—came and got them this morning. He asked about Jim, but I didn't say anything. No word yet.

The pump from the spring quit working yesterday. I'll have to carry all the water up the hill to the house now.

June 25th: No rain. The garden's drying up. Even the weeds.

I can see it now from the kitchen window. I sent Jimmy Junior and his friend Ben out in front to play with Blue before I went down to look. It's about as big as a washtub. Not shiny any more, like the surface has dried out. I poked at it again with a stick and it collapsed like bread dough when you stick your fingers into it.

It smelled something terrible, and it hissed when I pulled the stick out. It seems to be full of gas. I wonder if it has something to do with the septic tank. I suppose I could look at it and tell if it's full. I wonder where the septic tank is.

Jimmy Junior asked about his dad last night. I told him he was looking for a job in Louisville.

June 30th: Jimmy Junior hasn't seen it yet. Every day I think he will, but he hasn't mentioned it. Maybe he just doesn't talk about it. Like his dad—he's never mentioned him again.

Blue barks at it. It's as big as a bathtub now. It looks like a big boulder in the middle of the pasture. The pasture needs to be mowed but I don't have any gas for the tractor.

The weather's terrible. It must be a hundred. The icebox is on the blink—it won't make ice.

July 4th: Jim used to love the 4th of July. We always went to Bloomington because they had the best fireworks in this part of the state. I didn't tell Jimmy Junior it was the 4th.

The phone's dead. I tried to call Mama. It's probably just as well. I wouldn't have known what to say if she'd answered.

I noticed this morning that the grass is dying all around—I don't know what to call it—the black monster? It is monstrous. The grass and clover which were about eight inches high are brown for about ten feet around the base of the thing. I go every day to check it, although I don't have to go down. I can see it clearly from the kitchen

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window even though it's about 250 yards down the hill and out into the pasture. I keep Betty in the upper field now.

July 7th: Helen Simmons stopped by this morning. I asked her what the hurry was, it's only been six weeks since she's seen me and she's only two miles away. I don't have any coffee, so I couldn't offer her anything. She said I looked terrible. We didn't have a lot to say, so she left after a quarter of an hour. She asked Jimmy Junior to go play with Ben. It's good for him, so I tried to act grateful.

Jimmy and I don't talk much. We never mention it. But he knows it's there. I can feel its presence out there. It seems to give off some kind of oppressive energy. It makes me tired and listless. I see it in Jimmy Junior too. He goes to bed early, gets up late, plays a little with Blue, then just sits around in the house or the front yard.

It's the hottest summer I ever remember.

July 10th: The whole lower pasture's dead now.

Whatever it is, it's evil, foul, rotten. I don't know enough words to describe it.

Blue's gone. I searched the woods and through all the fence rows, the barn, the fields, everywhere. There's only one place he can be.

July 11th: After Jimmy was asleep last night I went down to the barn and found the corn cutter. I thought of using the scythe because of the long handle, but the corn cutter felt better. I could grip the handle with both hands and swing it pretty hard, and with the long blade I thought it could do quite a lot of damage. I know what *it* is now anyhow.

I went out into the pasture and after an hour's hesitation I finally got up the courage. I took a big swing with the cutter and cut a one-foot chunk off the side of the thing. It was really very easy. It's soft and spongy. The wound healed over in a few minutes and you couldn't tell where I had hit it, but not before I got a good idea what was inside.

I can't describe its loathsomeness. It's black, yet it seems to have many colors. It looks like an enormous boulder dominating the whole field now, like part of a mountain dropped from another world. Yet it isn't at all rock-like. It seems to move inside like a heavy, heavy liquid with no place to run. It seems solid, but when I cut it, it felt like soft cheese.

Oh, God, the smell. That's what let me know what it is—all the

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sludge and garbage coming up in my pasture that people have been putting into the ground all these years. It's all the sewage from Indianapolis and probably the whole north end of the state running down and bubbling up and consuming my farm.

July 13th: There's a smell of wet chicken feathers everywhere.

Two letters today. The electric bill is due on the 15th. The other was a letter from Jim, mailed from Dallas with $25.

July 15th: I'm losing my mind. I don't know what's been happening to me. I just let this black cancer eat up my world.

Jimmy Junior disappeared yesterday. I left him in the front yard playing with his wagon after lunch and then I dozed off for a few minutes and when I woke up I couldn't find him. He couldn't have gone far in the half hour I was asleep, but I must have walked twenty miles looking for him before dark. I even went to the neighbors.

I promised to call Helen, but she doesn't know I don't have a phone any more.

He's in it, of course. I knew it all along, but I didn't want to admit it. I suppose it's no worse to die in garbage than it is to live in it, but I'm not going to stand for it. I'm going to fight it.

I'm sure that Jim's responsible for it. I don't believe he even went to Dallas.

Poor Jimmy Junior.

July 16th: I have a plan, but it got delayed today. Deputy Sheriff Goodnight came by this morning, the horny old windbag. He asked about Jim and I told him that he had a job in Dallas and we'd be joining him in a few weeks after I got things tidied up a bit around the place. He asked about Jimmy Junior, too, and I told him he was visiting his grandma in Spencer. Then he made a pass at me. I talked my way out of it, and he soon got tired of that game, so he got ready to leave.

I asked him if he would pay the electric bill with the money Jim sent. I told him I didn't want to leave because I didn't know exactly when my mama was bringing Jimmy Junior back. He likes to have women obligated to him, so he took the money and bill from me. He'll pay it too, even if he is as corrupt as the next one.

By the time he left it was too late to put my plan in operation. I'm going to burn it . . .

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July 17th: It's more than a hundred yards across now. It almost reaches the barn and is at the base of the hill back of the house. Looking out from the house, all you can see is an enormous rubbery balloon of black sediment. It fills the lower pasture. It has changed the whole scene from a green country landscape to a moonscape of barren blackness fringed with just a few yards of woods, all that remains of the lower part of the farm, all that holds my farm to this world.

I brought the kerosene from the barn and some dry wood from the woodpile beside the house. I piled several large pieces of dead wood next to the thing closest to the house. I went back up to the woodpile to get some kindling and some matches, and when I got back down it had already swallowed up the wood and had moved several feet closer to the house.

I made several more trips, carrying more wood, but this time I laid a fire about ten feet from it.

Then I waited for it to move closer.

You can see it move now. It inches forward very slowly but if you gauge it against something stationary you can see it go. When it was a few inches away from the woodpile I poured a lot of kerosene on the wood. Just as the black mass touched the edge of the wood, I lit a match and started the fire.

I think it's a kind of plastic.

The fire burned fiercely at first but the black wall didn't flame. It's about ten feet high there. It just sort of started melting, the way some plastic bags do when you throw them in a trash fire. It just wrinkled and shrank where the fire touched it.

After an hour or two the fire went out. I got tired of carrying wood. It continued to smolder though. There's no smoke, but you can tell it's still smoldering because it sort of moves and bubbles and it's very hot. But it doesn't seem to get any smaller.

July 18th: It can't be Jim's fault. He can't have hated me that much. And he loved the dog and the boy.

The barn's gone. And the tractor inside. And I think Betty too. I can't locate her.

It doesn't seem to be growing on this side though. It's still smoldering and hasn't pushed up the hill at all yet. If only I could start fires all the way around it. I don't have any more dry wood though. I threw all the kerosene on it, but the kerosene just soaked in and wouldn't light.

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The only thing left in the garden is carrots. I hate carrots. Jim liked them.

I don't think he has enough brains to have done it.

July 19th: It's raining. Thank God.

Maybe it'll drown. Or dissolve.

It glistens like an asphalt parking lot in the rain.

Where is everyone? Ben? Why doesn't Ben come to play with the boy any more?

July 20th: It's spreading again. The rain put out the fire.

July 22nd: I'm so tired. And weak. I can't sleep for more than an hour or two.

It's a full moon. I can't sleep when there's a full moon. Last night I woke up in the middle of the night. I heard something, but I couldn't tell what. I went outside. It was a kind of humming or buzzing or singing sound, like a teakettle that's ready to boil. And it seemed like I could hear water running. Lots of it. Almost like a waterfall.

It seemed to come from everywhere. I was going to walk down the hill to see if the sound was coming from the black valley. I walked a few yards and then realized I wasn't going downhill at all. The ground was springy, like walking on crepe-soled shoes. As I walked a few more steps it was like walking on a trampoline. Each step lowered you a foot or two and then flung you back up. I realized I was walking *on* it.

I turned back to the house as fast as I could, but I walked and walked and didn't seem to be getting anywhere.

It seemed hours and hours. I finally reached the back door to the kitchen.

I fell into a chair at the kitchen table and drank two glasses of water.

It's drunk up the spring, I realized, before I fell asleep at the kitchen table.

July 23rd: Jim didn't go away. He's in it. That's why he disappeared.

But there was the money from Dallas or Denver or someplace.

Three gallons of water left.

Ben. And Helen too. Otherwise they would have come by.

I've got to rest.

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July 24th: Where's Deputy Sheriff Goodnight? I thought he'd come by. When was that? What was he here for? Something about my man?

The lights still work.

July 25th: If I eat another carrot I'll throw up.

I'll feed 'em to IT.

There's something in the water. It's brown. I'm too tired to care.

July 26th: It's so dark in here. IT is higher than the windows. Don't open them.

IT is around my ankles. IT is coming under the door.

IT has a rather pleasant smell. Ham gravy. Apple pie. And buttered corn.

Associated Press
May 20th, Bloomfield, Indiana: The body of Amy Fleener, wife of James Fleener, of rural Morgan County was discovered by her five-year-old son, Jimmy, and a neighbor boy when they returned from playing. The County Coroner, Dr. Roger Stone, estimated that Mrs. Fleener, age twenty-five, had been dead only a few hours when the boys discovered her body lying on the kitchen floor. The cause of death is unknown at this time, but foul play has been ruled out.

State police are trying to locate the husband, James, who was away looking for work, according to the son Jimmy. Helen Simmons, mother of the other boy, reported that the Fleener boy had told her his father had gone to Louisville.

The Sheriff's department has also ruled out suicide, although reportedly Mrs. Fleener left a lengthy note which she was apparently writing at the time of her death.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective novelet by

ERNEST SAVAGE

Sam Train had been a San Francisco cop for nineteen years, and then he turned private detective. Here is one of his most delicate investigations, involving an extraordinary woman—"a feather-width away from being an angel"—and an extraordinary man, full of vigor and fire—"one who fingers the beads of life and counts the awful gaps" . . . a case "sweet to the taste" . . .

THE MIRACLE DAY

by ERNEST SAVAGE

It was one of those days so crisp, so brittle, you were afraid to put your hand out and touch it. I've known days like these to shatter.

I like to stay inside where it's safe on days like these and that's what I was doing when I got the collect call from Al Brattles in Australia. It was that kind of a day, too, when you get collect calls from Australia.

I'm not much of a modern man, either. When I get long-distance calls the volume of my voice rises to the challenge. "Al!" I shouted, sending it across the seas.

"Not to worry about the charges," Brattles said first thing and equally loud, another unreconstructable ancient. "A very large check will be in the mail tomorrow. Sam, I want to hire you!"

"To do what?" my voice tempering down. The Al Brattles I knew and possibly loved and had last seen four years ago was not the kind of man who could hire anything or anyone. He still owed me four or five hundred—a loss I'd chalked up to entertainment.

"To do what I would do," he said, "if I weren't in the pokey in this God-forsaken land. To—"

"Pokey?"

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"Jail. Slammer. I'm halfway through a ninety-day stint for disturbing the peace of someone's face. Sam, I want you to check on this woman—"

"Woman—?" Another dunce-like response. Al Brattles and I had panned for gold together, had fished together, had gotten drunk together, and had—well, there had been women, too. But woman—singular? "Who?" I said. "Anyone I know?"

"No. I never mentioned her to you—or to anyone else. Hers is not a name one bandies about. Emily Dickson."

"Dickinson?"

"No—Dickson. But as full of poetry, dear boy, and the heat of life. And so forth—" He'd paused (by God!) shyly. Al Brattles *shy?*

"The *one*," I said in mock reverence.

"If there'd been but one, Sam, she would have been it, you're right. I never mentioned her because—what would have been the point? We were poles apart—the attraction of flat-out opposites. And I was broke. But now—" Another shy pause.

"What about now?"

"Well, one ages. One fingers the beads of life and counts the awful gaps. One yearns—"

Oh, boy! I thought, but said, "The pokey does that to a man."

"No! I loved her truly from the first, but her life was bespoke, as was mine, in its way. Though there is an immeasurable qualitative difference between us, I must say. She's a feather-width away from being an angel."

"Jesus," I whispered, and began tracking the meter of this aimless conversation. It wasn't your standard eighty-five-cent call home to Mom on Sunday afternoon. "So what do you want me to do?" I said sharply.

"Go see her."

"Why?"

"I got this note from her—yesterday. She mailed it ten weeks ago to the last address she had on me—in Denver. It's a kind of miracle, Sam. The damn thing must've traveled twice around the world to reach me here."

"Where's here—aside from Australia?"

"A four-corners in what they call The Outback. Let it be nameless. Sam, listen"—his voice dropped to a stagey whisper—"I hit it big out here—I mean millions! Uranium!"

"Did you say millions?"

"I said millions. I got one million in hand, and more on the way."

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Sure, I thought sardonically—in play money maybe, or I.O.U.s. Hyperbole was Brattles' middle name, and if he'd had a B.S. degree it wouldn't have been in science. On days like this you shouldn't even *answer* your phone. "So what did the note say?" I asked briskly.

"It said—'Wish you were here'."

"That's all?"

"That's all—but Sam, it's *how* it said it."

"Okay—how?"

"Printed. In big block letters—like a kid's. Or like someone who couldn't see—a blind person."

"*Is* she blind?"

"No—that's the point. Or at least, she *wasn't*."

"Was it signed?"

"Yes—in script. Not printed."

"Her signature?"

"Yes. No doubt about that. Her name is inscribed in a calligraphy of gold leaf in my mind."

"I'm sure," I said. "And where does this ang—this Emily live?"

"Right there in San Francisco, a mile or two from you. On—" He mentioned an address that—if it wasn't another figment of his heated imagination—was one of the two or three finest neighborhoods in town. Dickson, I thought, still brisk of mind; one of our founding fathers bore that name. Old Jedediah. "Go see her, Sam."

"But I still don't know what for," I countered. "Good ophthalmologist is the man she—"

"No! A friend! You!"

Ah, I thought, conceding that I *was* that, but still feeling evasive. "Why not just phone her direct?"

"And what? Ask her straight off if she's lost her sight?"

"I get your point. But you said something else a moment ago—that she was 'bespoke.' To whom? Is there an irate lover in the picture somewhere?"

"No. She nursed a dying mother for the first ten years that I knew her, and a dying father for the last ten. She's bespoke only to the goodness of her heart and the love of her family. She's a woman of old-style character, Sam."

"Is her father still alive?"

"I doubt it. He was failing four years ago when I last saw him. He was a tough old bird, but I think her message to me implies his death. Sam, for God's sake, man, go find out for me. Remember, I'm *hiring* you."

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There was more, but at the probable cost per word I kept it brief. I told him I'd do what he wanted and he said he'd call me in precisely forty-eight hours for my report. The last thing I said was don't reverse the charges, but he'd hung up. He'd always been quick as a squirrel.

Emily Dickson lived in a house on the crest of a hill. It was a big house in the late nineteenth-century style of—generally—Queen Anne, and from a hundred yards away in the pristine light of that particular day I could tell it needed paint. But then again, on that particular day, anything made by the hand of man would seem imperfect, needing something.

I parked my car slightly downgrade from her house and got out—tentatively. A breeze curled around my head, gentle as a halo. I stood riveted to the walk. If the world were flat, in the clarity of the air on that particular day, I could have seen to Fujiyama. I turned pagan. The air, the light, the sea, were in the hands of the Gods. A mere man should make offering before he dared even to breathe, let alone—

Two men came out of Emily's house, descended the front steps, and stood on the sidewalk talking, heads close, voices tense and low, with lots of arm movement. One was heavy, the other thin. Both wore their hair stylishly long and were modishly dressed. The plump one carried a briefcase in his left hand and when they were through talking he got into a ten-year-old gun-metal gray Mercedes four-door sedan parked at the curb and drove away with a squeal of rubber.

The thin one got into an even older topless MG that had been parked in front of the Mercedes and drove away with less élan but with his hair flowing grandly in the breeze. Neither had paid any attention to the day and were therefore doomed. Nor had they paid any attention to me.

She answered after my second discreet ring, pulling the door wide, big round tinted glasses over her eyes. "Edward?" she said. "William—?"

She was blind. "No," I answered. "Sam. Sam Train. Al Brattles asked me to stop by." That was all—after that I was breathless. Picture Athena in a checked blue and white blouse, a mustard-yellow skirt, and a burnt-orange vest sweater. As flagrant a mismatch of color and pattern as ever I'd seen; but not a scratch on her regality. Hera, maybe, at a rummage sale—

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"Come in," she said and I did and she closed the door and put out her hand which I took at once. It was firm and cool. "Where is Al?" she asked, and I plunged into an elaborate invention about where he was and what he was doing until I saw how wrong that was, and probably futile, and said bluntly, "He's in jail in some Outback town in Australia and will be for the next several weeks. He got your card there yesterday and called me this morning. I'm a private detective. He and I are friends."

"I had no business," she said, "sending that card. I would have retrieved it from the mailbox if I could have."

"Why did you send it, then? He quoted it as saying 'Wish you were here'." I was adapting to her quickly, sensing maybe what Al had sensed, and feeling protective. Her face, like the faces of so many of the blind, seemed serene, above all trouble. She must have been forty, but she looked much younger, another aberration, perhaps, of that particular day.

"Well, I did wish he was here," she said. "I needed someone at that moment I could trust without reservation and—I know no other."

"Has the need passed?"

"Yes. No. Does it ever, Mr. Train? But, please, let's step into the living room and be comfortable."

Fat chance. All my gears were meshed and turning. The day itself had been enough, I didn't need this stunning woman and her stunning house on top of it. I went directly to the window overlooking the Bay, magnetized; and if ever a mortal was allowed a *downward* glimpse into Heaven, this was it—on that particular day.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said.

I turned. "How long have you been blind?"

"If you mean totally," she said, "about a year. But it had been a long time coming, Mr. Train. Why?"

"And what happened ten weeks ago that prompted your card to Al?"

"Need it be a specific thing? Did you say you're a private detective?"

"I did, and I'm being one now. Also I'm being a friend of a friend. Have you any idea, Miss Dickson, what kind of a day it is outside?"

"Yes. Supercharged, electrical. Would you like me to tell you what's going on outside that window at your back, Mr. Train?"

"I don't doubt that you could, but let's take one thing at a time. What happened ten weeks ago? Think of me as Al."

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"Meaning I can trust you."

"Well, if you can't he'll have my head when he gets the chance—about forty-five days from now."

She strode (a carefully considered word) across the big room at an oblique angle to a wet-bar and got up bottles, glasses, and ice, all without a missed step or a groping hand. This was a room for all occasions—you could dream here, or get drunk; and she had command of it. "If you're a friend of Al's," she said, "you drink. What's your pleasure?"

I told her and she made it for me and plunked it down on the bar. For herself she mixed vodka and tonic—not too carefully, drops spraying the air. My glass was not particularly clean and the detective in me said she did her own dishes. I drank anyway, saying, "Cheers," and staring straight into her face. You can do that to the blind, study them point-blank; it seems the height of their vulnerability. But she was a feast for the eye, a face of sculptured perfection, lovingly warmed with Time. I didn't blame Al for keeping her a secret.

"You've upset me with your news," she said. "But I'm glad you came." Her left hand drifted up and fiddled with her hair, which had the appearance of order just emerging from chaos. I liked it.

"You look fine," I told her. "When Al calls again I'll tell him you look fine. Who are Edward and William?"

"You saw them?"

"Yes. They talked for a while on the sidewalk outside. Presumably them. Tensely."

"Edward is a lawyer—the heavy one. He's administrator of my father's estate. His father was my father's lawyer—and friend. The other—William Mellis—is the son of a former partner of my father's—a minor partner. They take a proprietory interest in my affairs."

"You mean since your blindness."

"Mostly since my father's death, Mr. Train. I'm not much of a businesswoman."

"Ten weeks ago," I asked again. "What happened then?"

"Oh—a small thing, really. A maid problem—but the straw, as one says."

"Tell me about it."

"Marion—the maid—stole some money from me and then said she didn't. It upset me out of all proportion—and I wrote that note to Al."

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"You keep money around the place?"

"It was a coin, a Krugerrand. I was getting used to the feel of it, learning to distinguish it from Canadian Maple Leafs and Mexican fifty-peso pieces. Over the last several months Mr. Shiff had bought a lot of all three kinds for me. Mr. Shiff is Edward, the heavy one."

"You keep them here?"

"Yes. There's a wall safe in the master bedroom upstairs."

"Is that where Marion took it—from the safe?"

"No. From the fireplace mantel over there." She pointed at a carved marble mantelpiece over a fireplace against the far wall. "I had put it down there," she said, "when I undertook to make a fire. It was a Thursday—one of Marion's two days. She left shortly after, and the coin was gone. I searched everywhere for it, thinking that I might possibly have been wrong, but I wasn't, Mr. Train. The following Monday—her other day here—I accused her of it and she reacted with anger, storming around the place like an animal gone wild. Then a little later she came into the kitchen, where I was, and literally slammed the coin in my hand. She said she'd just found it on the floor under that table over there—the marquetry—and she had quit on the spot. She said she was tired of working for a woman as dumb and blind as I am."

"Dumb?"

"Yes, dumb. And perhaps I am. Anyway, it depressed me. I must certainly be difficult to work for."

"You're positive she took the coin?"

"Absolutely. I had searched every square inch of this room, floor and all."

"So therefore she must have brought it back."

"Yes."

"Why?" I took a long pull of my drink and she did the same of hers. Her eyeglasses were the kind that adjust to the quantum of light and I could see her eyes quite clearly through the lenses. They seemed to be on mine, they seemed to be working, but of course they weren't. Her other senses told her where to look. She exuded alert intelligence.

"Guilt," she said. "Contrition. I don't know why."

"Had she worked for you long?"

"Six months."

"Is she the only one who worked for you? This is a big place."

"Yes, it is, and yes, she was. But I don't use much of the house any more, Mr. Train. This room, the kitchen, the master bedroom

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upstairs, the bathroom. The rest of the place is closed off. "Ah, yes," she amended, "the wine cellar in the basement"—and smiled for the first time. I had to fight myself to keep from touching her hand or cheek, to show my appreciation of her smile. The warmth, stored by Time, never ceased to flow.

But I was on a job and I said almost roughly, "Miss Dickson, how do you know Marion brought the same coin back?"

"I know. I've acquired considerable tactile sensitivity over the past several years. The coin had a small nick along one edge. It was the same coin, Mr. Train."

"You said you have quite a number of them in that safe. How many—in round figures?"

"More than seven hundred."

"You're kidding!"

"No. Perhaps I shouldn't have told you."

"Perhaps you're right. How many other people know that? Did Marion know?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. What is it you're thinking, Mr. Train?"

"That they ought to be in a bank. Do you have a safe-deposit box?"

"I have a *safe*, Mr. Train."

"No safe deposit?"

"Mr. Shiff keeps my things."

"You said he's administrator of your father's estate. Is he also its trustee?"

The question confused her for a moment, and again I wanted to reach across and touch her hand. "Well, he has my power of attorney," she said finally. "Whatever that means. I told you I wasn't much of a businesswoman."

She had finished her drink and assumed that I'd finished mine, her hand reaching for it with uncanny accuracy and one slight adjustment before the strong tapered fingers closed around it firmly. I had never before penetrated this far into the world of the blind and watched with wry fascination the deft, cadenced dance of her hands. The world of the blind is rhythmic, it moves like a marching band.

On a desk placed as though to catch light from the window overlooking the Bay was a book I recognized now as a Braille primer. Against the wall near the fireplace was a stereo console with stacks of tapes alongside. A world of touch and sound, too. And booze,

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maybe, I thought; but she'd put just a dash of vodka in her glass, two or three fingers of Scotch in mine. Wine with dinner, though, I would bet—wondering how she told one bottle from another. The world of the blind could quite possibly be as interesting as ours in its own way—a patronizing judgment I discarded at once. But one hell of a lot more vulnerable.

"How long has he had this power of attorney?" I asked.

"Since father died. About fourteen months."

"Has he used it?"

"Yes—that's how I acquired the gold. He has sold my stocks and bought gold. This afternoon he told me my dollar worth has increased by more than one hundred thousand. I find that quite satisfactory, Mr. Train."

"I'll tell Al when he calls," I said blandly, and got up with my Scotch and went back to that magic window. You can't, I admonished myself, let your prejudice against long-haired lawyers—or any kind of lawyer, for that matter—blind you to the facts. If he's made her a hundred-grand profit in a few months, that's more than you and Al together could do in years. "How come," I said, nevertheless, "does Mr. Shiff not keep your gold with the rest of your assets?"

"He wanted to do just that, but *I* wanted the coins kept here, Mr. Train. Besides, I have no other assets now. Just the house."

I turned and faced her as though she had eyes. "Therefore—since gold earns nothing—no income." It was a question.

"Yes. That's why Edward and William want me to sell the house. They want me to invest the proceeds in Treasury notes, or what they called TD's, I believe."

"Time deposits."

"But I don't want to, Mr. Train. I was born in this house—literally *in* it. I know its dimensions to the last quarter inch. I know what can be seen from its windows. I know its smells, its moods. It's my world, Mr. Train."

"Then don't sell it," I said. "Sell some gold."

She sighed. "But still, for one person to occupy all this space? That doesn't seem right in this day and age."

"Is that Shiff's argument?"

"Yes. But it's mine too."

"What do you suppose Al would say?"

"He would say keep it, I'm sure. He spent many pleasant hours in this house and loved it. Before father became too ill the two of them played a lot of chess together."

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"In the master bedroom?"

"Yes."

"Where the safe is?"

"Yes. The safe seems to concern you, Mr. Train. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, I would. I'd like to see the whole house—the part you're using anyway."

"You're welcome to—but you won't find it too well kept, I'm afraid."

"You should see my digs, Miss Dickson."

The unintentional gaffe in that throwaway line didn't seem to trouble her, so I didn't let it trouble me and she strode (again) out of the living room, down the hall, and through the kitchen door without breaking stride, me in her wake. Like a real-estate agent showing a house, she said, "This is the kitchen."

"Yeah," I said. Looking through the tall narrow window over the sink I could see the north half of the Golden Gate Bridge, see the traffic pouring along its lanes, tell, almost, the color of the drivers' eyes. The day had lost none of its clarity, its charge or challenge. The day said, "I dare you," without specifying what. I turned away.

The kitchen had been modernized, probably more than once. It was spotless, the formica of the counter tops gleaming, the stainless steel sink showcase clean. Where it didn't take eyes, she maintained clinical standards.

There were two bags of groceries on the counter, a cupboard door open. I'd interrupted her in the process of putting stuff away. Shiff and Mellis, no doubt, had brought the things. Probably once a week one of them brought a load of provender. Somebody would have to. Somebody would have to pay her bills, her taxes, take her to the doctor, hire her help and pay them.

I asked her, "Who paid Marion when she worked here?"

"Mr. Shiff. He made up two envelopes a week with her wages in cash. She insisted on cash."

"Most day people do," I said.

The kitchen phone was wall-hung, just inside the door. Next to it was a framed bulletin board, stripped of all else save a column of names and phone numbers embossed by a label-making machine, Braille style. At the top of the column the fire department and cops, then a doctor, then Shiff. At the bottom, the name and number of Marion Crowder. I wrote down both hers and Shiff's in my notebook.

Miss Dickson said, "What are you doing?"

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I turned and faced her. "What Al would want me to."

She accepted that, but then fired back, an adversarial air growing between us, "Why is Al in jail?"

"I gathered it was for fighting. Fist-fighting, brawling."

"Why do men do that?" she wondered. Not condemning the practice, just curious.

"Often," I said, "for women. In this case, I would think, just for the hell of it. Al has a lot of excess energy."

She accepted that too, knowing its truth, if she knew him at all, and then strode purposefully out of the kitchen, leading me swiftly upstairs to the master bedroom. She went directly to the window overlooking the Bay, as though her eyes were, as mine certainly were, drinking in the scene. The day had not lost an erg of its power and wouldn't until the sun cooled itself in the sea.

"I don't suppose," she said, a touch wistfully, "the old *Lurline* or *Matsonia* is passing by down there just now."

"No. Two skulking freighters, a lot of sailboats—"

"There is a certain philosophy," she said, "that holds that the self is all that exists. It's called Solipsism."

"I've heard of it."

"If it's true, Mr. Train," she went on, "then *both* the old *Lurline* and *Matsonia* are passing by down there, because I see them. Anything I have ever seen out this window I can see again any time I want. I have the advantage over you, Mr. Train—I can be selective about what I see, you must look at what's there."

"I believe that."

"I tell you this for one reason only. I want you to tell Al that I'm fine. I want you to tell him that I wrote that note in a one-time moment of weakness. I don't want him discommoded, or put out of pocket."

She was still facing the window, in profile to me. A strand of her lovely hair had come loose and the collar of her blouse was turning up where it should have turned down; but she didn't know these things. She was the only beautiful woman I have ever seen who was totally without artifice in the presence of a man. In contrast to the day, which was blandishing the world with all kinds of false promise, she was purely herself. She had spent her life in this house at the beck and call of two dying old people, and out of that loving servitude had grown a primal strength.

"I'll tell him," I said forthrightly, and she turned and walked in that defiant way of hers around the end of the large unmade bed

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(why should it not be?) to a framed oil painting hung on the wall over a narrow credenza on which a Bible lay closed alongside a small cut-glass vase holding two dusty red artificial roses. The ensemble looked as innocent as a park bench on Sunday afternoon until Miss Dickson did something to the edge of the frame and swung the picture open like a door. "Voila!" she said softly, and that smile lit her face once again.

It was the biggest home wall safe I'd ever seen, the gray metal frame of the thing two by two-and-a-half feet at least. Large enough for her seven or eight hundred one-ounce gold coins and a lot more.

"Does that ease your mind, Mr. Train?"

"Turn the dial," I said.

"Why?"

"Does it click? Could someone standing where I'm standing count the clicks?"

She spun the knob; it was nearly silent. "There," she said.

"Does Mr. Shiff know the combination?"

"No. I told you no one does."

Well, someone should, I thought, but kept it to myself. I was ready to leave. Al had given me a limited mandate and I'd probably exceeded it by now; but a blind and disheveled Goddess is hard to tear yourself away from. Somehow you want to stand protectively by.

Almost tersely I thanked her for the drinks, told her I could find my own way out, and left her standing by the safe.

Al had promised he'd call me again in exactly forty-eight hours and it was more than that now. I was in my apartment on Van Ness, waiting. Fog grayed the air outside my second-floor windows, dimmed the building across the street, improving—all things considered—the view. It was an easy day to live with.

I didn't know what time it was in Australia, or even, for sure, what day. Here it was mid-morning on Wednesday, and when (and if) Al called I had news for him. Yesterday morning I'd found Marion Crowder working as a maid at a motel down near the Embarcadero. She'd been there for two months, she said, and was happy as a clam. Why she'd ever worked for that dumb old broad up on the hill, she'd expostulated rhetorically, she couldn't imagine; "dumb" was the operative word again. Miss Dickson had quoted her as using that epithet before, and I asked Marion why she considered Miss Dickson "dumb," which I didn't. It is why I'd spent the morning tracking her down—to square that anomaly. But it was simple: because, Marion said, that gold coin she'd made such a fuss over was mostly lead.

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Her boy friend had shown her when she'd "borrowed" the coin for a weekend. Probably all her coins were fakes. So—"dumb." Right?

Well, somebody was.

I went back home and phoned my friend Sergeant Bill Brade at the Folsom Street Station and asked him if there'd been any action lately in counterfeit gold coins. I'd been a San Francisco cop for 19 years, a lot of them spent in a prowl car with Bill, so he generally takes my questions seriously. He asked me to hold the line and when he came back on a few minutes later, said there hadn't, but that a small-time die-maker named Harry Wilson had been paroled from Soledad six months ago after a four-year rap for counterfeiting silver dollars. 1894 and 1901 issues, Bill said, reading it from Wilson's file, collectors' items worth several hundred bucks apiece five or six years ago, and God knows how much more now. Wilson's shop had been on 8th Street near the Freeway, Bill said, and maybe he'd opened up again.

He had. I got there at one o'clock Tuesday afternoon, and it was a walk-through. Wilson was drinking after-lunch coffee in his grubby little office and offered me a cup, which I took. He said, sure, he'd made the coins, three hundred and fifty each of three different kinds, and showed me samples. At a glance they'd fool the untrained eye, but closer inspection revealed such aberrations as "Zanudu" where Canada appeared on the Maple Leaf, and "37.5 Gr Oro Fako" instead of "Oro Puro" on the Mexican fifty-Peso piece. On the Krugerrand one of the R's had been deleted and Kruger himself had been equipped with a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

"Perfectly legal," Wilson said. "Hell, they even weigh out ten-fifteen percent light. Special alloy of mine, mostly lead. This guy said it wouldn't matter."

"This guy," I said, "was slender, about five ten—?"

"No, he was tubby."

"Wore close-cropped hair?"

"No, long. Said he wanted the coins for advertising giveaways. Real-estate man. Said he was gonna encase 'em in plastic with this slogan he wanted to promote: 'You can't eat a gold coin, but you can grow food on a piece of land'—something like that."

"Paid cash, I'll bet."

"Right. Cash on the barrelhead. Ten bucks apiece. Hope he got his money's worth."

"He did. Left no name, did he?"

"No. But—"

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"But what?"

"Happens I took down his license number." He fumbled around on his desk and came up with a scrap of paper. "NRY 642," he recited. "Look, Mr. Train, I've spent four of my sixty-two years in jail and I don't want to spend another twelve and one-half minutes there. Took the license number for insurance."

"What kind of car?"

"Mercedes-Benz. That gun-metal color. Oldish. He'd parked it down the road a way. Guy was up to no good, right?"

"Right."

Wilson sighed, eyes glazing with the memory of hard time at Soledad. "So many of us aren't," he said sadly.

So I had news for Al, if and when he called. But it was also news for the D.A. In fact, it was specifically news for the D.A., news I had no right to keep to myself.

But it's a funny thing—I've spent a quarter of a century as a cop and/or private eye, and one of the real satisfactions of the work is that you can say to the world, every once in a while, "I know something you don't know." It is, possibly, the primary source of power—when misused; but under any circumstance it's sweet to the taste. I savored it that morning, waiting and musing.

She had a naturally disarrayed look, like a basket of fresh laundry not yet sorted and ironed. She had probably never been tidy; just devoted and beautiful. It was a different day today—no miracles or madness to be snatched from the air. A day of gray work, slugging it out, doing your job—protecting the blind of eye from the blind of soul—when you could. And not so much fun knowing something the other guys didn't know. Shiff and Mellis were pure scum and needed to suffer the iron bit of retribution. And they would, too—a pleasure to contemplate; but not forever.

Still I sat there waiting, and when the phone rang at 12:30 I was within two minutes of giving up on Al, jail or no jail. It was Miss Dickson.

"I'm having a drink," she said, "and wish you were here—or somebody was."

"Like old Al."

"Yes, Al. Or a friend. I was just informed by Mr. Shiff that my house has been sold. They're taking my view away from me, Mr. Train."

A pang of jealousy: Al first, me second. But at least I was within

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reach; and Al, I decided just then, never would be, not in forty-five days, not ever. He was one of Nature's transients, always on the move, always broke, his fortune just over the next hill. So whatever got done for Miss Emily Dickson would have to get done by me.

"Not," I said ambiguously, "if we play our cards right."

Her news hadn't really been a surprise. Shiff and Mellis would move fast now. She had nothing left but her house—and her life—and the pattern of their scheme would demand that they take both. How easy to kill a forty-year-old blind woman who lives in a multi-level house. Especially when she trusts you.

"Well, I've decided I don't want them to," she said firmly.

"If I told you to relax, would you?"

"No!"

"How much did he sell it for?"

"He said one hundred and ten thousand dollars."

I almost bit my tongue. The place was worth a half million on today's market. He hadn't sold it, the sod, he'd bought it—for resale and a huge profit later. "In cash or gold?" I said.

"I don't know, I didn't ask. Mr. Train, have you heard from Al?"

"No," I said, and added for whatever comfort was in it, "Not yet. He's in jail, remember."

"Then what did you mean about relaxing?"

I was framing an answer to that when someone knocked on my door and I covered the phone and listened, like a startled bear. My apartment is my cave. Few people even know where it is and they invariably phone before coming over. "Just a moment," I told Miss Dickson *sotto voce*, and went and stood by the side of the door and listened some more.

Two years ago an unfriendly person out there in the hall had pumped six magnum slugs through that door, so I seldom stood in front of it any more. When the knock came again, I said sharply, "Who?" and when Brattles' unmistakable voice answered, "Your friend from Down Under, you inhospitable jerk!" sheer disbelief froze my mind as I groped for the knob and pulled the door open. It couldn't be, and yet it was. There are not two of him.

He hadn't changed a bit. He was wearing the same sagging brown tweed jacket I'd last seen on him four years ago, and very possibly the same pair of pants. The same aggressive guardsman mustache exploded from under his nose, there was a touch of whiskey on his breath, and his eyes still twinkled the same intense and dangerous blue. His hand was forward and I took it and led him into the room.

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More or less speechless, I held a finger to my lips and pointed at the phone. He understood at once and went into the kitchen where he knew I kept my booze, and I went to the phone and told Miss Dickson I'd get over later in the day and hung up. I didn't tell her I might possibly bring a friend.

Brattles was counting one-hundred-dollar bills onto my kitchen table from a clutch of them in his hand. "First off, my dear Sambo," he said, "we square up accounts, old *and* new."

I was in awe at the improbable sight and failed to stop him at ten, which would have been enough, but did stop him at twelve, and mumbled, "So it was real."

"As fleas on a dog. One million bucks snug in the bank—minus, naturally, something rather substantial in the way of tax—plus fat royalties forevermore."

"But you were in jail—"

"Until an hour after I talked to you the other day."

"You escaped?"

"No. Squared up that account, too, so to speak. I felt a sudden new urgency to get out and—presto!—a little money in the proper sequence of hands becomes the equivalent of forty-five days off for good behavior. I'm just beginning to learn the power of this stuff."

"It also buys clothes, razors."

"Hah! You should have seen the look on the lady in the airplane seat next to mine. Thought she was riding a freight, poor love. But I didn't have time for the amenities before taking off, Sam, and I just landed an hour ago." He poured whiskey into two glasses and shoved one my way. Then he said abruptly, "She's blind, isn't she?"

I was still waffling, in shock. "What makes you think that?"

"I remembered something her father told me—the possibility was in the genes, he said. It may have been a warning, now that I think of it. I used to play chess with him up in his room. He told me a lot of things. That, plus her winsome note, Sam. It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's true. But it's not really the greatest of her problems."

"No? Then what is, for God's sake?"

"Fill your glass," I said, turning for the living room, "and bring the bottle. It's a two- or three-drink story."

The surprise was wearing off and my gelid mind had begun to move again, savoring not only his unexpected presence, but conceiving a more fitting punishment for Shiff and Mellis than the slow grind of Justice I'd had in mind before. Turn your little gems of information over to the D.A. and sometimes they never glitter in

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the light of day again—and that wouldn't do. Not with himself here now—and with as much money as a small nation. No man would enjoy money more than Al Brattles, nor spend it more freely in the pursuit of evil and defense of good. And the plan that was growing like Topsy in my mind had an additional virtue—it would work, or it wouldn't, in a matter of a day or two. In any event, Shiff and Mellis would get theirs, and get it good.

The card I handed Shiff said, "S. McCloud Train, Real Estate Investments." No address, no phone number, which is super-chic these days, the printer told me. The "McCloud" was Al's idea—it was the name of the lucky mine he'd sold in Australia.

Shiff's eyes flicked from my $90 shoes up to my $30 haircut, and then switched appraisingly to Al, who looked enough like English royalty in his new clothes to draw a naval salute. His hands rested on the chaised silver head of a Malacca stick, planted firmly between his spread knees. There was no question we'd carry the thing off—Shiff was obviously a born snob.

"Must have the place," Brattles muttered nasally. "Simply must have it. Knew it at once—brumpf! Queen Anne, donchyaknow."

Shiff didn't know Queen Anne from Prince Charles, but Al had him entranced. It was 11:30 in the morning. I'd phoned Shiff's office in advance, just to make sure he was in, then Al and I had appeared almost at once.

The faded gilt lettering on the frosted glass door in the time-stained hall outside said, "Shiff & Shiff"—reference to a father-and-son enterprise that was probably well-intentioned once. But the father had died, and boys aren't what they used to be.

The two-room suite evinced the relics of an old elegance. Dark oak paneling rose waist-high around the walls, and a crystal chandelier hung from a classic rosette in the fourteen-foot-high ceiling of the room we were in, as well as in the reception room adjoining. There, an extraordinarily nubile young woman had received us, a wad of gum parked in her blushing left cheek. Clearly, Shiff *fils* didn't conduct your garden-variety legal trade. But I already knew that.

"I took the liberty," I said pompously, "of knocking on the door of the house after Sir Alf—after Mr. Brattles expressed such a keen interest in it, and the—a—lady who responded, a Miss Nixon, I believe—"

"Dickson," Shiff corrected.

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"Dickson—thank you—referred us to you. She said—unless I grossly misunderstood—that you had—ah—recently gained control of the property, perhaps even purchased it, and—"

"That's correct, Mr. Train, I have actually purchased the place, but I did so as a favor to poor Miss Dickson—you no doubt noticed her handicap."

"Yes, blind, I gathered."

"And desperately needing help. I'm an old family friend and paid her more than the place is worth out of that friendship—but one hopes, naturally, to—er—turn a profit."

Brattles harrumphed, "Name a price, man!" He glared at me. "Train, get the man to name a price!"

"How much?" I said to Shiff, and his eyes ceased looking vague and friendly.

"Four hundred and fifty thousand."

More than four times what he'd agreed to pay Miss Dickson for it two days ago—and that, no doubt, in phony gold. I snapped back, "Four hundred even!"

"Four twenty-five!"

"Four fifteen!"

"Four twenty!"

I glanced at Al and said tersely, "Done!"

Shiff had his hand out to seal the bargain, but I chose to ignore it. A moment before I'd seen him wipe it dry against a leg of his trousers. All that hair and beard and blubber, and all those clothes, nearly as expensive as the array Brattles had insisted that he and I buy for this charade, hid the nervous wreckage of a bank clerk playing buccaneer. But this was a moment of triumph for him—or so he thought; he'd brought off the big coup.

I could almost follow the figures as they gathered in his mind: four hundred thousand here, four hundred thousand there. He'd siphoned at least that much from his fiduciary account with Miss Dickson—had drained her dry, in fact; and now—inescapable logic—he'd have to kill her. I could read that in his eyes, too—but hoped Al couldn't. And then he and Miss Bubble Gum out there could take off for the white sands and azure waters of every thief's dream.

Brattles was harrumphing again. "Cash, Mr. Shaft. No nonsense about financing, and so forth. Cash on the drumhead! Agreed?"

"Er—agreed, of course."

"Gold, in fact, Mr. Shift."

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"Shiff," Shiff said. "Gold, Sir Alf—Mr. Brattles—gold?"

"Gold! Fresh out of the ground!"

"Ground? Coins, you mean—?"

"Coins indeed! Delivered into—what do you call it in this country?—escrow. This afternoon."

"This afternoon? That's—"

"I want that woman out of there and myself in by mid-week."

Al was carrying it too far too fast, and I blinked caution at him. Shiff had technical problems that Al wasn't aware of—the difficulty of a double escrow, for instance. He'd just acquired the property himself—or under some dummy name—and no doubt the new title hadn't yet been recorded. We didn't want to crowd him totally out of the picture; but Al's need to get at him in one way or another, to punish him, was burning on his face like a rash. When I gave him all the details of Shiff's skulduggery yesterday, he'd wanted to go out and buy a gun. But instead we'd gone out and bought clothes, made plans, and got our hair cut.

"Perhaps," I said to him warningly, "we can be a little more accommodating than that." I turned to Shiff. "But I would like to open escrow this afternoon, Mr. Shiff. The sooner one gets these things firmed up, the better, don't you agree?"

Indeed he did. Never let a live one off the hook was clearly one of his working rules. I suggested an escrow office two blocks away on Sutter Street and he agreed to meet us there with the necessary documents at three o'clock that afternoon. Then I took Al firmly by the arm and wheeled him out of the place.

"With work, patience, time, and money," Al said to me while we waited, "we could turn you into a fairly decent-looking citizen of this sophisticated town." He made an ostentatious adjustment to the jacket of the three-hundred-dollar suit I'd probably never wear again out of cowed respect. "As it is, Sambo, you generally look like a man who drives a Hupmobile in—say—Iowa."

"Not quite up to the mark, you're trying to suggest."

"Late by a decade or two."

"Canes," I rejoined, "went out of fashion when we began to pave the streets."

"Not silver-headed Malaccas. Been the mark of the gentleman since our forebears took Injah."

We were seated on a naugahyde couch in the waiting room of the Myers & Hellman Escrow office on Sutter. It was ten minutes after

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three and the banter was a symptom of nerves. Nothing was holding our little playlet together but a gossamer thread of hope, co-mother of invention. If Shiff didn't show up, we'd have no choice but to turn it all over to the slower processes of law.

Facing us on a matching couch across the room, his hands scrubbed almost clean of grease, wearing a suit, tie, and dark glasses, that morning's *Chronicle* spread before his face, was Harry Wilson. If and when Shiff appeared, and if he was the man who'd bought the fake coins, then Harry was to nod his head at me. For this simple but critical service he'd already been paid one of the hundred-dollar bills of which Al seemed to have an endless supply, and he'd agreed to stick around in case we needed him later.

It became 3:13; and then at 3:14 Shiff walked in, briefcase in hand. Harry lowered his paper and nodded, Al tensed up like a bull in Madrid on Sunday morning, and I sighed softly. I hadn't wanted Al to mention "coins" in Shiff's office, just "cash." I feared Shiff might be sensitive to the word, and maybe he was, but it hadn't scared him off.

We got up, greeted one another with restraint, and went down a short hall to a booth where Jake Myers, a man I'd known for years, was waiting for us. On the counter which separated his side of the booth from the customers' side, were ten small canvas drawstring sacks, each containing 75 of Emily's coins. Last night I'd taken Emily out to dinner; and Al, who'd learned the combination of the safe one day when Emily's bed-ridden father wanted something from it and she wasn't there, had removed the coins, unbeknownst to her. They were in the same sacks that Shiff had delivered them in originally, and when he saw them he stopped and would have turned and run except that I was behind him in the narrow door of the booth and there was nothing for him to do but step forward and sag weakly into a chair.

We didn't need Harry. He was going to show himself to Shiff in case Shiff decided to fight off the inevitable; but Shiff didn't.

He confessed to all and Al wanted to take him out on Sutter Street and beat him to death with the unbloodied Malacca, but once again my slightly cooler head prevailed and we got Shiff to sign a statement recounting his and Mellis's sins against Emily Dickson, duly witnessed by Jake Myers. Shiff's power of attorney was terminated, the title to her house returned, and the money they'd stolen from her—

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Al took me out into the waiting room. The money, he said, should go to the Seeing Eye Dog Foundation, or whatever it's called. It should go, I said, back to Emily, it's hers. No, Al insisted, to the dogs. "With the money *and* the house, she'd be worth more at the moment—after taxes—than I'm worth," he said, "and me tender Irish pride couldn't take that now any more than it ever could. Why do you suppose, my dear fellow, I've been digging holes all over the face of the poor bruised earth looking for wealth? To bring myself into some kind of parity with her, you idiot."

So the money went to the dogs.

And the next day Al, Malacca in trembling hand, as carefully garbed as the Prince of Wales, a veritable feast for the eyes, the idiot, presented himself for the first time in four years to his lady, whose various items of dress were a design and chromatic horror, whose freshly laundered hair was disorganized enough for a gale-force wind, and who altogether was a glory to behold.

He said something like, "B'Jesus!" handed me his stick, and took her in his arms. And she didn't even ask who he was, dammit. She knew.

I got this picture postcard a week ago from Kobe, Japan. It said in clumsy block letters, *WISH YOU WERE HERE*, and it was signed by Al, who surely didn't mean it.

They'd boarded a twelve-passenger freighter in Oakland four weeks ago, accompanied by an overpriced basket of fruit from me. I truly wished them well; but what ancient, blue-nosed censor in my soul wished also they'd been married first?

Then today I got this second card, which read in clumsy block letters. *MARRIED TODAY BY CAPTAIN. GLAD YOU'RE NOT HERE*. It was signed by Al, who surely meant it.

And outside it was another of those San Francisco days when, if the San Andreas fault doesn't swallow the town whole, then something just below that order of interest is bound to happen.

But hang loose, I was telling myself—there's only one Al Brattles, and he's halfway around the world.

Which is right where he was when all this started.

I don't think I'll answer my phone today.

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

WOOLRICH: Thirteen years after his death in 1968, there is evidence that the works of Cornell Woolrich are still read and remembered around the world. Iwan Hedman's Swedish magazine *Dast,* devoted mainly to writings on mystery and crime fiction, has recently published a slim hardbound volume in its *Dast Dossier* series which serves as a tribute to Woolrich the writer. Most of the 46-page book is devoted to Francis M. Nevins' 1977 essay, "The Poet of the Shadows: Cornell Woolrich," but also included are an introduction by Bertil Falk, a Woolrich bibliography, and brief tributes by K. Arne Blom, Jan Broberg and other Swedish writers. Illustrations include several photographs and drawings of Woolrich, as well as cover illustrations from American, British, and Swedish editions of his works. Cost of the book is $10.00 plus postage, but, unfortunately for most of us, the text is in Swedish.

Back in America, a film called *Union City* had a brief run in New York and a few other cities last fall. It's based upon Woolrich's story "The Corpse Next Door," collected in *Nightwebs.*

PAPERBACK NOTES: The Penguin Crime Monthly series, now four years old, is selling briskly in bookstores, and Penguin Books plans an intensive promotional campaign in coming months. This year's titles start off with *Mad Hatter's Holiday* by Peter Lovesey (January), *The Long Divorce* by Edmund Crispin (February), *The Memorial Hall Murder* by Jane Langton (March), and *One Foot in the Grave* by Peter Dickinson (April).

Bantam Books has launched a monthly mail subscription series under the title Bantam's Best Thrillers. Annual subscribers receive three free books upon joining and pay $27.95 for the twelve selections, chosen from among the best-selling mysteries and thrillers published each month by Bantam. Authors selected include Frederick Forsyth, John Le Carré and Jack Higgins.

CHANGING PUBLISHERS: A number of leading mystery writers are changing publishers this year. As previously reported, the new Dick Francis racing thriller, *Reflex,* will be published by Putnam this spring. It's been chosen as a dual main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club,

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the first Francis novel to be so honored.

Best-selling author Robert Ludlum is moving to Random House for his next novel, to be published early in 1982. And Gregory Mcdonald's next two Fletch novels will be published by Warner Books.

FAN MAGAZINE: Fans of the popular British television series *The Avengers*, still being rerun on late-night TV, will be interested in *Huntress*, a slick-paper fan magazine devoted to the series and its stars. The first issue will be published in March, at $2.00 a copy until March 31st, $3.00 thereafter. It's available from Richard Davis, P.O. Box 1327, Harlan, KY 40831. (Diana Rigg, most popular of Patrick Macnee's co-stars on the series, is currently filming a sequel to *The Muppet Movie*.)

PUZZLES AND BOOKS: International Polygonics is a firm which publishes, oddly enough, both jigsaw puzzles and books in the mystery field. Its clever two-sided puzzles include "Murder Ink," "Sherlock Holmes," and "Edgar Allan Poe." In the book field the firm has published trade paperback editions of Baroness Orczy's *The Old Man in the Corner*, Carroll John Daly's *Murder From the East*, and Richard Hull's *The Murder of My Aunt*.

JAMES BOND LIVES!: The corporation which owns the copyright to all the James Bond books by the late Ian Fleming has chosen British mystery writer John Gardner to continue the Bond saga through at least three more novels. The first of these, *Meltdown*, is due for spring publication by Jonathan Cape in London, with an American edition to follow.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Margaret Truman is working on a second mystery novel with a Washington setting, following the success of *Murder in the White House*. It's tentatively titled *Murder on Capitol Hill*, and Arbor House hopes to publish it later this year. (Is she the first presidential daughter to publish a book in the mystery field? No—Julie Nixon Eisenhower edited an anthology titled *Great Stories of Mystery and Suspense From The Saturday Evening Post*, which Curtis Publishing Company brought out in 1976.)

Chelsea House has announced plans for several series of trade paperbacks in the field of American history. Two series of special interest to fact crime readers will be *Great Trials in American History* (32 volumes) and *Violence in America* (16 volumes), both edited by Leon Friedman of Hofstra University.

Ray Bradbury is working on a mystery which he describes as "indirect homage" to Hammett, Chandler, and James M. Cain.

And one of America's largest publishers is considering a line of mystery classics to be sold primarily by mail order. More on this later.

NOTE: Wilbur Smith's *Wild Justice*, mentioned in last issue's column, is to be titled *The Delta Decision* in its American edition, published this month by Doubleday.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Sin, the Bible tells us, is ugly and drab. The film fashioned from Lawrence Sanders' best-selling novel, *The First Deadly Sin,* is likewise grim and depressing, an exploration of a dark netherworld in which evil could never be taken as attractive. The film is heavy with dark shadows, sunlight is fleeting, and even though the setting is New York during the Christmas season, there is no festive spirit in the air, only December gloom. And murder.

For a psychotic killer is somewhere at work. For two years he has been striking down total strangers at random in different sections of the city, and no one until now has spotted a pattern in the senseless deaths. But Detective Sergeant Edward X. Delaney, about to retire from the force and seeking to distract his thoughts for a time from personal problems—a gruff new superior, a seriously ill wife rushed to the hospital—notices a similarity between a street homicide the previous night—an executive struck down from behind on his way home with a curious pickax-like instrument—and a death some months before. He begins to dig.

Soon he has uncovered a whole string of murders, stretching across years and occurring in every borough of the metropolis. Indeed, precisely because the deaths had been so scattered, no individual police investigation had linked them into a pattern. And because all of the earlier victims were killed outside of Delaney's precinct, his unsympathetic, cost-efficient captain commands that he stick to his own backyard, lay off, and ride out his final days before retirement. But to Delaney the killer is a demon he must at all costs exorcise, a shadow he must wrestle in the night, so he tracks him down alone.

Frank Sinatra—his face creased, his look weary, his step troubled—drags life to the part of the obsessed, unhappy policeman. It is his first screen role in ten years. The singing star of *On the Town, et al,* has certainly been no stranger to crime drama. He has appeared in *The Man with the Golden Arm* as a drug addict, in *Suddenly* as a presidential assassin, and in *The Manchurian Candidate* as the man who prevents a political assassination. (It is rumored that after John F. Kennedy's death Sinatra hoped the last two films would be withdrawn from circulation.) He robs a casino in *Ocean's Eleven,* hijacks a luxury liner in *Assault on a Queen,* and has cracked cases as *The Detective* and private eye *Tony Rome,* playing Rome again in *Lady in Cement* and another police detective in television's *Contract on Cherry Street.* Certainly a respectable police record for an artist whose major thrust has been in the area of American popular music!

Sinatra's impressive performance in *Sin* is aided by two other veteran

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actors. James Whitmore portrays a coroner in the Medical Examiner's Office, and his craggy, cheerful authority is a faint reminder of a real-life chief medical examiner, the late Dr. Milton Helpern. Whitmore, unruffled in the queasy realism of the morgue setting, chats about the "Christmas rush" ahead and gives Sinatra the first real evidence to connect the last two murders, even diagnosing the height and other facts about the killer—true detection of the dead, a science that Helpern pioneered. Martin Gabel plays an aging curator of arms and armor, plodding about his cluttered museum office feeling useless until Sinatra involves him in the hunt for the murderer. Gabel, tracking down the pickax weapon, is both marvelously eccentric and quite poignant: he relishes the assignment, refusing to surrender to age and inactivity; he wants to be "good to the last drop." It is an endearing portrait.

Despite many good moments, however, *The First Deadly Sin* is not all the film it could have been. It chops and shortens the Sanders book (of necessity, one might add) but what is left is murky. The killer's motivation is baffling and carelessly dismissed. Much of the film seems more dark mood than substance. The mountain-climbing climax of the novel has been totally changed.

Admittedly, however, the novel is difficult: three prior attempts to bring *The First Deadly Sin* to the screen failed, and co-producer Sinatra deserves credit for tackling a challenging subject with uncompromising grit. Somber and gray to its very last moment, the film is not an unqualified success, but it wasn't easy either. It deserves a watch. Especially as we should note with some satisfaction that the world's best-known male singer chose as his return to the screen a taut and suspense-filled police drama.

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INTERVIEW: HUGH PENTECOST (1)

This is the first part of an interview that will be concluded in the next issue.

EQMN: When were you first published, and where?

PENTECOST: In 1920, when I was 17 years old, I was going to be an actor. My mother had been an actress in Richard Mansfield's famous repertory company. My father was an opera singer—London, Paris, and at the Met in New York. Through family friends who had pull, I got a rather good part in a silent film starring Eugene O'Brien, one of the early matinee idols. I was good, I thought—on my way to being the new John Gilbert. Unfortunately, there aren't many good parts for teenaged boys. The best I could get were extra bits in crowd scenes. So I wrote a script with an excellent part in it for a teenaged actor. I sold the script—but I didn't get the part!

In my junior year at Columbia in 1923, I wrote two short stories and,

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knowing no better, submitted them both in the same envelope to *Argosy* magazine, then part of the Frank A. Munsey group. To my surprise and delight, I sold them both—for $50.00 each. They were my first stories to appear in print. I've never done anything since but write stories for books, magazines, radio, television, and films.

EQMN: Your real name, of course, is Judson Philips. Hugh Pentecost is an extremely strong as well as successful pseudonym. How did you arrive at it?

PENTECOST: In 1939 (I think), I wrote a novel called *Cancelled in Red*, about skulduggery among stamp collectors and stamp dealers. At that time, Dodd, Mead was awarding an annual mystery novel prize. To be eligible you must not have been published previously by Dodd, Mead. In that year they came up with nothing they wanted to give the award to and they suggested they would give it to *Cancelled in Red*, but I would have to take another name since they'd already published Judson Philips. It meant extra money and extra publicity. Of course I said yes. My full name is Judson Pentecost Philips. Pentecost was my mother's maiden name and she had an uncle, long dead, who had been a well known criminal lawyer in New York. His surviving daughter had no objection to my using his first name and so I took it. Oddly enough, Pentecost has always done a little better than Philips.

EQMN: Have you any special pet among your series characters, Pierre Chambrun, John Jericho, Julian Quist, Peter Styles, or Uncle George Crowder?

PENTECOST: My favorite characters are John Jericho and Uncle George Crowder. Jericho began as a character in full-length books, but didn't do too well. I've done quite a few short stories about him so that his fans will know he's still alive and well and living in Jefferson Mews. Uncle George began as a short-story character in *This Week*, the old Sunday supplement of the *New York Herald-Tribune*. There was one book-length novel about him, but it didn't light up the sky. Peter Styles, about whom I've written 18 novels, is another favorite.

EQMN: Your ninth Julian Quist mystery, *The Homicidal Horse*, has been hailed by *Publishers Weekly* as one of your best. How do you keep up the pace and quality of your work year after year when you could so easily rest on your laurels?

PENTECOST: The older I get, there are fewer things I can do that I used to do well. Fortunately for me, the greatest fun I've had in a long life is telling stories. I'm still able to do that, I hope, without getting winded. I also hope the day won't come when editors feel impelled to say, "Let him eat laurels!"

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Is there really such a thing as a "man's book" or a "woman's book" in the mystery field? Certainly some writers see their works categorized in that way, but in my opinion, any book so one-dimensional that it can appeal to only one sex—the soggy romance at one extreme or the mindless bloodbath at the other—is by definition junk. A really good action-adventure yarn will attract its share of female readers, and just as surely any top-drawer romantic suspense novel has much to offer male readers. To demonstrate the second half of that proposition, here are three new novels by "women's writers" whom this male reader numbers among his favorites.

*** Phyllis A. Whitney: *Poinciana,* Doubleday, $10.95. Sharon Hollis encounters hostility, danger, and a succession of unpleasant surprises as the new mistress of her husband's Palm Beach estate. It's a typical Whitney situation, and the character interplay, realization of background, and storytelling technique are as sure as ever.

*** Barbara Michaels: *The Wizard's Daughter,* Dodd, Mead, $9.95. This Victorian romance with a Spiritualist background has some of the sly humor usually associated with Michaels' alter ego Elizabeth Peters. The hero is easy to pick, the villain only slightly less so, but the plot is well worked out, better clued than most romantic suspense novels, and resolved in a nice atmospheric climax.

*** Velda Johnston: *The Stone Maiden,* Dodd, Mead, $8.95. Heroine Katherine Derwith, who was abandoned in a New York warehouse as an infant, wants to find out her real ancestry before marrying a socially prominent young lawyer, a quintessential prig she wisely drops before too many pages go by. (How do nice girls in gothics get involved with such drips to begin with?) Her search for her background puts her in danger and involves her in yet another plot with its roots in Nazism. The reliable Johnston is not at her very best here, but near enough.

*** David Carkeet: *Double Negative,* Dial Press, $9.95. The background of this first mystery (seemingly a sure Edgar candidate) is an Indiana institution for the study of children's linguistic development. The first victim and the suspects are members of the staff whose personalities are nearly as bizarre as their names—Wach, Woeps, Aaskhugh, Milke, Orffmann, and Stiph. Only hero Jeremy Cook sounds ordinary. At times hilarious and always conspicuously clever, this novel reflects a love of language above all else. Readers with fond memories of Guy Endore's *Detour at Night* are bound to enjoy it.

*** Joyce Harrington: *No One Knows My Name,* St. Martin's, $10.95. One of our best short story writers does not achieve quite the same level of excellence in her first novel, but the style, character observation, and technical trickery make this theatri-

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cal mystery worth any reader's time. Somebody in the Duck Creek Playhouse's summer repertory company is a crazy killer.

*** Stephen King: *Firestarter,* Viking, $13.95. The latest by one of the great contemporary storytellers centers on a little girl with the talent of pyrokinesis. She and her father are pursued through most of the novel by a sinister government agency known as the Shop. This is not King's best—the conclusion doesn't really live up to the fascinating first half—but his ability to juxtapose horror with mundane everyday details is as remarkable as ever.

*** Michael Barak: *The Phantom Conspiracy,* Morrow, $11.95. With a tale involving Nazi artistic plunder (a favorite MacGuffin lately) and contemporary Presidential politics, Barak (who also writes as Michael Bar-Zohar) proves once again that technical proficiency and an amazing way with a plot can overcome excessively melodramatic prose and stilted dialogue, especially when so many books have the opposite qualities of fine style and thin plot. Fans of Robert Ludlum should enjoy this.

*** Richard Hoyt: *Decoys,* M. Evans, $8.95. Few writers entering the private eye field are able to create a genuinely fresh voice. Hoyt manages the trick with Seattle-based John Denson, a not-too-hardboiled shamus who makes an offbeat bet with a female operative regarding who will reach the truth first.

*** Joseph Payne Brennan: *The Shapes of Midnight,* Berkley, $2.25. Stephen King provides an enthusiastic introduction to this enjoyable, relatively low-key collection of horror stories. Highlights include "Canavan's Back Yard," "The Horror at Chilton Castle," and "The House on Hazel Street," the latter suggesting the work of a more somber Jack Finney. "Slime," apparently considered a weird classic of sorts, has been robbed of much of its impact by too many horror movies of the Fifties and since. Though at least seven of the twelve have been in earlier Brennan collections, most were available only in very limited editions.

** Art Bourgeau, *A Lonely Way to Die,* Charter, $1.95. Set in the little town of Cannibal, Tennessee, and featuring a team of newly discharged Marines called Snake and F. T., this may be the raunchiest comedy-mystery ever published. Crude it surely is, but anybody not too hung up on good taste will have a lot of fun with it.

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"Q"

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DETECTIVERSE

by MARK GRENIER

JUST WHAT HE KNEADED

An unfortunate baker named Joe
Robbed a bank because business was slow.
When arrested he said,
"I was making good bread,
But I found myself wanting more dough."

IN FULL CAREER

Said a getaway driver named Dyer,
After cops in pursuit opened fire,
"Since the lead from their gats
Gave our buggy four flats,
I believe that it's time to retire."

BOWLING THEM OVER

Said a murderous bowler named Pike,
"Bashing heads with my ball's what I like.
On an evening of fun
I will spare not a one,
And the cops never know where I'll strike."

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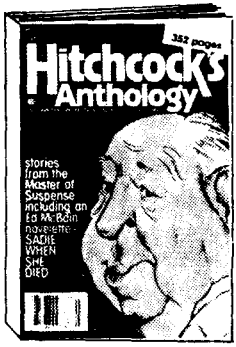
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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 574th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "crime" against the always fascinating backdrop of a daily soap opera . . .

The author, Georgiana Eidukas, is in her early thirties, married, and is presently a student at College of DuPage. At first she studied fine arts and English, later "various medical subjects in job-related classes" while she worked as an instructor and supervisor at a large medical insurance company. She enjoys reading, canoeing, ethnic cooking, is an avid traveler, and recently discovered a new interest—photography . . .

CLIFFHANGER

by GEORGIANA EIDUKAS

It was the worst influenza outbreak of the season but I have no complaints, because it was that particular bout with the flu that saved my life. Not *my* life exactly, but the life of Clarissa Evans White, the character I play on "All the Livelong Day," the Number Two rated soap opera of the past several seasons, and one of the last live, untaped soaps still running. And if the flu hadn't struck our set last Thursday I'd be standing in the unemployment line this very minute.

I'd like to say this treachery began that Thursday, but in truth it's been a long time coming. When your character's been lying in a coma for the last nineteen weeks, and the only lines you've been given are occasional sighs—well, I ask you, isn't it pretty clear what's going to happen?

For all these years I've played that shrew—complaining, cajoling, whining. I've been married thrice and divorced twice, with numerous illicit liaisons in between. My last husband—a sweet handsome man, and no match for me—died nineteen weeks ago, the same day

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my coma began. There were suspicious circumstances surrounding his death but the police were unable to question me because of my very convenient coma.

But that Thursday—well, on that Thursday the writing was on the wall, or should I perhaps say, on the script.

I came to the studio on time, even though I've not had a word of dialogue for ages, while Ruthie Maynard, that blankety-blank, who plays Mary Grant—"good ol' Mary"—was late, as usual. All these weeks I've been on time, gone to makeup and hair-styling, donned my hospital gown, run through the script, and then done my scene. I say "done" rather than "acted" since it's pretty hard to act out a coma, but I must say I've been *very* believable, considering the circumstances.

Complaining to the producer had got me nowhere. He's been happy with our ratings and our writer has introduced several new characters into our story using *young*, new actors. *Very young* new actors.

Une femme d'un certain âge apparently has no appeal these days with the younger viewing audiences and when Clarissa's coma became a weekly feature with no end in sight, I began to wonder—and to worry.

That Thursday, after our regular live broadcast, I went to my dressing room, changed clothes, ate the sandwich I'd sent out for, and went to pick up my Friday's script. We usually spend at least two or three hours after our live air-time rehearsing our scenes for the next day, getting fitted for wardrobe, and getting our lighting and camera angles set up; but there were no scripts that day.

At first I thought that because we'd had such a bad outbreak of flu and both Paul Scott, our producer, and Joe Hester, our director were out sick, that maybe there was some foul-up with the printing; but Robbie Sullivan, the assistant director and son of our sponsor, Robert Sullivan of Sullivan Soap Flakes fame, called us together and announced that we were all to show up early the next day and we'd be handed our scripts shortly before air-time.

Now, normally, Friday's show ends with a cliffhanger—will Betty marry Bob? Will Freida tell Arnold about her long-lost son? Will Frank ever remember who he really is? Or is his amnesia hiding a deeper secret? But once every year or so we have our regular Friday cliffhanger *and* a major plot resolution, and for those scenes the cast is not given the script until just before air-time—so the word won't get out to the public and because Joe, our director, likes

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the spontaneity involved in acting a scene moments after reading the script. Needless to say, we all had to be quick studies.

Well, when that clod, Robbie Sullivan, told us all to come in early Friday for our scripts, everyone's eyes were on me. I could feel people physically backing away from me, afraid to be tainted by that pariah, the soon-to-be-unemployed actor; and I didn't blame them. You can't have a character lie in a hospital bed in a coma for nineteen weeks without everyone suspecting what's going to happen, and now they all surely knew.

I stayed in my dressing room until quite late. I wanted to avoid the other cast members. I'll admit it, I was feeling pretty bitter. I'd given twenty-two years of my life to "All the Livelong Day," and now I was getting the sack, while that Ruthie Maynard would stay on forever, playing safe, solid Mary Grant, everyone's friend. It just wasn't fair.

I left my dressing room expecting to hear nothing but the silence of an empty studio, and instead I heard thumping and banging coming from down the hall, near the offices. A light shone in the corridor, cast from the open door of the Writers' Room, and a steady stream of very unfeminine swearing was coming from a very feminine mouth.

Lilly Sullivan, our all-purpose pinch hitter and Robbie's cousin, stood in the midst of a confusing muddle of papers.

"Aaah!" she screamed, waving her arms about her head like some comic-strip character. "I'm going crazy!" Her hair was hanging in her eyes, her hosiery was torn, and her pale suit was smudged with still-damp printer's ink.

"Need help?" I offered.

"Oh, golly, Liz, yes, but you really can't help me. I can't let anyone see the scripts before tomorrow. That jerk Robbie was supposed to stay and help me but he had to meet one of his cuties. With everyone out with the flu we're so short-handed, I don't know how we'll make it to the weekend."

"How about if I don't peek?"

"Huh?"

"Why don't you sort the pages and hand them to me upside-down. That way I won't see the script."

"Gee, thanks, Liz," she said, "but I really can't let anyone near these pages. I haven't even read the script myself."

With her last words a lofty tower of papers slid off the edge of her desk, and she sent up another howl. As she bent to scoop up the

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fallen pages, she never even saw the sure swift hands of Liz Snyder, a.k.a. Clarissa Evans White, slipping a copy of Friday's script into her purse.

My worst fears were justified.

I read the script through that night, several times, in fact. There was no changing the words that were swimming before my eyes. In the third and final scene of Friday's show Clarissa Evans White, with her faithful young doctor by her side, dies in her coma, never regaining consciousness. Now, her doctor is the one who sighs as he lifts the edge of the sheet up and over the face of his dead patient, ending a career of almost a quarter of a century. The more I read, the more I stewed, the angrier I got. There was a way, a way to change the future, and I had to take the chance.

I spent several hours rewriting the second and third scenes and making fairly professional-looking copies.

In the first scene, two of our newest characters merely introduce a newly formed relationship, and it had little bearing on my future. The second scene was with Ruthie Maynard. When Mary Grant, her character, learns by telephone of a blackmailer's mysterious threat, she panics and tries to kill herself by putting her head in the gas oven. This scene was to be Friday's cliffhanger. At the last moment Tom Dawes, an actor playing the role of an old friend, comes to the kitchen door and sees through the window what is happening. He calls out Mary's name and bursts through the door at the last moment. Kneeling at her side, he pleads with her to live, to keep on breathing, to hang on till help comes.

Of course Mary will live. I know that because Clarissa Evans White doesn't. No writer would kill off two of his most well-established characters in the same segment. The fans wouldn't stand for it. Besides, Mary Grant got sacks and sacks of fan mail every week, while poor Clarissa, the evil shrew, has been getting less and less mail each week she's been comatose.

I got to the studio extra early the next morning. Lilly Sullivan came in shortly afterward and gave me my copy of the script. There was a forlorn expression on her face that told me she'd read the script. I did my best to ignore her sad eyes.

Breezily I asked, "Need a hand, Lilly? I'd be glad to help you pass out the scripts."

"Thanks, Liz. Anyone down at your end yet?"

By "my end" she meant the actors' dressing rooms. "Just Tom Dawes and that young actor Bob Coombs who plays the doctor. Shall

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I give them their copies?" I was safe there; it was only a minor lie.

"Would you, Liz? I know I shouldn't but I'd be really grateful. With everyone sick I'm really rushed. Mike Vannet called last night and said the bug's got him, too. Looks like it'll be Robbie's show today."

Mike Vannet is the writer of "All the Livelong Day" and a more fortuitous illness could hardly have been arranged. That meant one less person for me to worry about.

I waited by the side entrance to the studio and as Tom and Bob came in I gave them "their" copies of the script. Robbie was running a little late when he finally arrived but I managed to pull him to one side.

I gave a discreet smile and whispered confidentially, "There's an attractive young girl downstairs in a booth in the coffee shop who asked me to tell you, 'Remember three months ago.' "

His face blanched, drained instantly of his usual ruddy color, and he nodded dumbly.

Robbie is notorious in his attentions to the younger members of the opposite sex. I don't know whom he was seeing three months ago, but I do know he's always seeing a woman or possibly several women. So the message I gave him was pretty certain to at least pique his interest; but I must say I was surprised at the initial reaction.

As he left to go downstairs I chuckled to myself, picturing a plump, reddish young man, anxiously hopping from booth to booth, peering into faces, looking for the one he would recognize, all the while wasting precious rehearsal time. Poor duped Robbie.

Now I was all set. I had nothing to do until air-time but keep Ruthie Maynard company. She behaved so solicitously toward me, cooing her sickeningly sweet platitudes till I felt I was approaching a state of hyperglycemia. At one point Tom Dawes began walking toward us, but I gave him a warning shake of my head and he veered off to talk to the wardrobe mistress who happened to be standing nearby.

Robbie returned in time to discuss camera angles with the cameramen and run through the dialogue with the two new actors doing the first scene. Seeing Ruthie and myself standing together he opened his arms and enfolded both of us. As he did so he gave me a peculiar glance, more closely related, I think, to his search in the coffee shop, than to commiserate with me about my imminent demise.

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Lilly gave him a signal and he called for quiet and we all went into our respective sets and took our places. The music began as the cameras started rolling.

The first scene went exactly according to the original script. Too much so, in fact. The inexperienced actors were wooden, stiff. A lot of work would have to be done with them if there was any hope of continuing their roles.

After the commercial break Ruthie's scene went according to her original script, also. I was propped up in my hospital bed watching the scene across the studio. She ended her telephone conversation and went through an agonizing time trying to decide what to do. Her anguish was heartbreaking as she stuck her head into the oven and her limp body slumped to the floor. My heartbeat began to quicken as Tom Dawes beat on the door. Bursting into the kitchen, he knelt and held her flaccid body next to his. The camera moved in for a close-up of his emotion-wracked face. "Oh, no," he wailed. "I'm too late. *My dear friend Mary is dead!*"

I would have paid a fortune if the camera could have recorded that scene with a close-up of Ruthie's face as the eyes of the recently departed Mary Grant popped open and a glare of hatred shot wildly about the studio.

Pandemonium broke loose. As we cut away for a commercial Robbie went racing over to Ruthie's set, thinking that Tom Dawes was writing his own lines; Ruthie was screeching like a peahen; the script girl, out with the flu, wasn't there to take the flak, but Lilly, still wearing the torn stockings of the night before, was looking faint.

No one had yet thought to look at me and all too soon the commercial was over and my scene began.

As my Clarissa lay in a coma I could hear the muffled threats as people tried to calm Ruthie Maynard and get her off the set. It wouldn't take long for everyone to figure out what had happened and who was responsible.

I could sense the tension next to my bed. Bob Coombs, whose only lines until now have been on the order of 'No change, nurse,' and 'We'll have to wait and see,' actually had a half page of dialogue.

He began, "Clarissa? Oh, my God! Clarissa!"

I fluttered my eyelashes gently and tossed my head from side to side. I could see the faint red light on the camera. I focused on Bob's face.

"Where am I?" I asked.

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"The hospital. You were struck on the head. You've been in a coma for a long time."

"My husband . . . ?" I gasped. I was giving the performance of my life.

"I don't suppose you remember anything?"

"Dead," I mumbled. "He's dead."

"Then you do remember?"

"Yes."

I nodded slowly and a huge and very genuine tear came rolling down my cheek as a harried cameraman tried to wing it and the organ music built to a vibrant crescendo. The entire cast and crew hovered in the shadows behind the camera. Robbie was shuffling through the pages of his script, trying to figure out where he'd blown it.

Again I nodded and gulped and the tiniest tremble shook my lower lip as I spoke.

"It was Mary," I said. "She did it."

And I smiled into the camera, a simple but noble smile for all my new fans.

Music. Fadeout.

NEXT ISSUE . . .

9 ***NEW*** stories—including

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

JACK RITCHIE (about the body in the vault)

CHRISTIANNA BRAND (about the Hand of God)

REG BRETNOR (about the wonder cure)

and a surprise reprint novelet by

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

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a *NEW* crime novelet by

RUTH RENDELL

Even when he was a boy, James Alexander Fyfield had a devouring interest in poisonous flora. He kept bottles of distilled poisons on the top shelf of the bookcase in his bedroom—the room his mother called "a real glory-hole"—and he had a simple way of disguising the bottles' lethal contents. No one in the family was aware of what the bottles concealed . . .

THE BOY WHO COLLECTED POISONS

by RUTH RENDELL

The plant, which was growing up against the wall between the gooseberry bushes, stood about two feet high and had pointed, jaggedly toothed, oval leaves of a rich dark green. It bore, at the same time, a flower and a fruit. The trumpet-shaped flower had a fine delicate texture and was of the purest white, while the green fruit, that rather resembled a chestnut though of a darker color, grew spines all over it and had a rather threatening or warning look.

According to *Indigenous British Flora*, which James held in his hand, the thornapple or Jimson's weed or *datura stramonium* also had an unpleasant smell, but he did not find it so. What the book did not say was that *datura* was highly poisonous. James already knew that, for although this was the plant's first appearance in the Fyfields' garden, he had seen it in other parts of the village during the previous summer. And then he had only had to look at it for some adult to come rushing up and warn him of its dangers, as if he were likely at his age to eat a spiky object that looked more like

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a sea urchin than a seed head. Adults had not only warned him and the other children, but had fallen on the unfortunate *datura* and tugged it out of the ground with exclamations of triumph as of a dangerous job well done.

James had discovered three specimens in the garden. The thorn-apple has a way of springing up in unexpected places and the book described it as "a casual in cultivated ground." His father would not behave in the way of those village people but he would certainly have it out as soon as he spotted it. James found this understandable. But it meant that if he was going to prepare an infusion or brew of *datura* he had better get on with it. He went back thoughtfully into the house, taking no notice of his sister Rosamund who was sitting at the kitchen table reading a foreign tourists' guide to London, and returned the book on British flora to his own room.

James's room was full of interesting things. A real glory-hole, his mother called it. He was a collector and an experimenter was James, with an inquiring, analytical mind and more than his fair share of curiosity. He had a fish tank, its air pump bubbling away, a glass box containing hawk moth caterpillars, and mice in a cage. On the walls were crustacean charts and life-cycle-of-the-frog charts and a map of the heavens. There were several hundred books, shells and dried grasses, a snakeskin and a pair of antlers (both naturally shed), and on the top shelf of the bookcase his bottles of poison. James replaced the wild flower book, and climbing onto a stool, studied these bottles with some satisfaction.

He had prepared their contents himself by boiling leaves, flowers, and berries and straining off the resulting liquor. This had mostly turned out to be a dark greenish-brown or else a purplish-red, which rather disappointed James who had hoped for bright green or saffron yellow, these colors being more readily associated with the sinister or the evil. The bottles were labeled *Conium Maculatum* and *Hyoscyamus Niger* rather than with their common English names, for James's mother, when she came in to dust the glory-hole, would know what hemlock and henbane were. Only the one containing his prize solution, that of deadly nightshade, was left unlabeled. There would be no concealing, even from those ignorant of Latin, the significance of *Atropa Belladonna*.

Not that James had the least intention of putting these poisons of his to use. Nothing could have been further from his mind. Indeed, they stood up there on the high shelf precisely to be out of harm's way, and even so, whenever a small child visited the house, he took

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care to keep his bedroom door locked. He had made the poisons from the pure scientific motive of *seeing if it could be done*. With caution and in a similar spirit of detachment, he had gone so far as to taste, first a few drops and then half a teaspoonful of the henbane. The result had been to make him very sick and give him painful stomach cramps which necessitated sending for the doctor who diagnosed gastritis. But James had been satisfied. The poison worked.

In preparing his poisons, he had had to maintain a close secrecy. That is, he made sure his mother was out of the house and Rosamund too. Rosamund would not have been interested, for one plant was much the same as another to her. She shrieked when she saw the hawk moth caterpillars and her preeminent wish was to go and live in London. But she was not above tale-bearing. And although neither of his parents would have been cross or have punished him or peremptorily have destroyed his preparations—for they were reasonable, level-headed people—they would certainly have prevailed on him to throw the bottles away and have lectured him and appealed to his better nature and his common sense. So if he was going to add to his collection a potion of *datura*, it might be wise to select Wednesday afternoon when his mother was at the meeting of the Women's Institute, and then commandeer the kitchen, the oven, a saucepan, and a sieve.

His mind made up, James returned to the garden with a brown-paper bag into which he dropped five specimens of thornapple fruits, all he could find, and for good measure two flowers and some leaves as well. He was sealing the top of the bag with a strip of Scotch tape when Rosamund came up the path.

"I suppose you've forgotten we've got to take those raspberries to Aunt Julie?"

James had. But since the only thing he wanted to do at that moment was boil up the contents of the bag and that he could not do till Wednesday, he gave Rosamund his Absent-minded Professor look, shrugged, and said it was impossible for *him* to forget anything *she* was capable of remembering.

"I'm going to put this upstairs," he said. "I'll catch up with you."

The Fyfield family had lived for many years—centuries, some said—in the village of Great Sindon in Suffolk, occupying this cottage or that one, taking over small farmhouses, yeomen all, until in the early nineteen hundreds some of them had climbed up into the middle class. James's father, son of a schoolmaster, taught at the University of Essex at Wivenhoe, some 20 miles distant. James

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was already tipped for Oxford. But they were very much of the village too, were the Fyfields of Ewes Hall Farm, with ancestors lying in the churchyard and ancestors remembered on the war memorial in the village green.

The only other Fyfield at present living in Great Sindon was Aunt Julie who wasn't really an aunt but a connection by marriage, her husband having been a second cousin twice removed or something of that sort. James couldn't recall that he had ever been particularly nice to her or especially polite (as Rosamund was), but for all that Aunt Julie seemed to prefer him over pretty well everybody else. With the exception, perhaps, of Mirabel. And because Aunt Julie preferred him she expected him to pay her visits. Once a week these visits would have taken place if Aunt Julie had had her way, but James was not prepared to fall in with that and his parents had not encouraged it.

"I shouldn't like anyone to think James was after her money," his mother had said.

"Everyone knows that's to go to Mirabel," said his father.

"All the more reason. I should hate to have it said James was after Mirabel's rightful inheritance."

Rosamund was unashamedly after it or part of it, though that seemed to have occurred to no one. She had told James so. A few thousand pounds from Aunt Julie would help enormously in her ambition to rent a flat in London, for which she had been saving up since she was seven. But rents were going up in price all the time (she faithfully read the estate agents' page in the *Observer*), her twenty-eight pounds fifty would go nowhere, and without a windfall her situation looked hopeless. She was very single-minded, was Rosamund, and she had a lot of determination. James supposed she had picked the raspberries herself and her "We've got to take them" had its origin in her own wishes and was in no way a directive from their mother. But he did not much mind going. There was a mulberry tree in Aunt Julie's garden and he would be glad of an opportunity to examine it. He was thinking of keeping silkworms.

It was a warm sultry day in high summer, a day of roses, languid air, and half-veiled sun, of bumblebees heavily laden and blown but still sweet-smelling. The woods hung on the hillsides like blue smoky shadows, and the fields where they were beginning to cut the wheat were the same color as Rosamund's hair.

The village street of Great Sindon was very long and straight, as is often the case in Suffolk. Aunt Julie lived at the very end of it

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in a plain, solidly built, gray-brick, double-fronted house with a shallow slate roof and two tall chimneys. It would never, in the middle of the nineteenth century when it had been built, have been designated a "gentleman's house," for there were only four bedrooms and a single kitchen, while the ceilings were low and the stairs steep; but nowadays any gentleman might have been happy to live in it, and village opinion held that it was worth a very large sum of money. Sindon Lodge stood in about two acres of land which included an apple orchard, a lily pond, and a large lawn on which the mulberry tree was.

James and his sister walked along in almost total silence. They had little in common and it was hot, the air full of tiny insects that came off the harvest fields. James knew that he had only been invited to join her because if she had gone alone, Aunt Julie would have wanted to know where he was and would have sulked and probably not been at all welcoming. He wondered if Rosamund knew that the basket in which she had put the raspberries, having first lined it with a white-paper table napkin, was the kind that is intended for wine, being made with a loop of cane at one end to hold the neck of the bottle.

Rosamund had changed, he noticed, from her jeans into her new cotton skirt, the Laura Ashley print, and had brushed her wheat-colored hair and tied a black velvet ribbon round it. Much good it would do her, thought James, but he decided not to tell her the true function of the basket unless she did anything particular to irritate him.

But as they were passing the church, Rosamund suddenly turned to face him and asked him if he knew Aunt Julie now had a lady living with her to look after her. A companion, this person was called. James hadn't known—he had probably been absorbed in his own thoughts when it was discussed—and he was somewhat chagrined.

"So what?"

"So nothing. Only I expect she'll open the door to us. You didn't know, did you? It isn't true you know things I don't. I often know things you don't, I *often* do."

James did not deign to reply.

"She said that if ever she got so she *had* to have someone living with her, she'd get Mirabel to come. And Mirabel wanted to, she actually liked the idea of living in the country. But Aunt Julie didn't ask her, she got this lady instead, and I heard Mummy say Aunt

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Julie doesn't want Mirabel in the house any more. I don't know why. Mummy said maybe Mirabel won't get Aunt Julie's money now."

James whistled a few bars from the overture to the *Barber of Seville*. "I know why."

"Bet you don't."

"Okay, so I don't."

"Why, then?"

"You're not old enough to understand. And, incidentally, you may not know it but that thing you've got the raspberries in is a wine basket."

The front door of Sindon Lodge was opened to them by a fat woman in a cotton dress with a wrap-around overall on top of it. She seemed to know who they were and said she was Mrs. Crowley, but they could call her Auntie Elsie if they liked. James and Rosamund were in silent agreement that they did not like her. They went down the long passage where it was rather cold even on the hottest day.

Aunt Julie was in the room with the French windows, sitting in a chair looking into the garden, the gray cat Palmerston on her lap. Her hair was exactly the same color as Palmerston's fur and nearly as fluffy. She was a little wizened woman, very old, who always dressed in jumpers and trousers which, James thought privately, made her look a lot like a monkey. Arthritis twisted and half crippled her. It was slowly growing worse, which was probably why she had engaged Mrs. Crowley.

Having asked Rosamund why she had put the raspberries in a wine basket—she must be sure to take the basket straight back to Mummy—Aunt Julie turned her attention to James, demanding of him what he had been collecting lately, how were the hawk moth caterpillars, and what sort of a school report had he had at the end of the summer term. A further ten minutes of this made James, though not usually tender-hearted toward his sister, feel actually sorry for Rosamund, so he brought himself to tell Aunt Julie that she had passed her piano exam with distinction, and if he might be excused, he would like to go out and look at the mulberry tree.

The garden had a neglected look and in the orchard tiny apples, fallen during the "June drop," lay rotting in the long grass. There were no fish in the pond and had not been for years. The mulberry tree was loaded with sticky-looking squashy red fruit, but James supposed that silkworms fed only on the leaves. Would he be allowed to help himself to mulberry leaves? Deciding that he had a lot to learn about the rearing of silkworms, he walked slowly round the

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tree, remembering now that it was Mirabel who had first identified the tree for him and had said how wonderful she thought it would be to make one's own silk.

It seemed to him rather dreadful that just because Mirabel had had a baby she might be deprived of all this. For "all this"—the house, the gardens, the vaguely huge sum of money which Uncle Walter had made out of building houses and had left to his widow—all this was surely essential to poor Mirabel who made very little as a free-lance designer and must have counted on it.

Had he been alone, James might have raised the subject with Aunt Julie who would take almost anything from him even though she called him an *enfant terrible*. She sometimes said he could twist her round his little finger, which augured well for getting the mulberry leaves. But he wasn't going to talk about Mirabel in front of Rosamund. Instead, he mentioned it tentatively to his mother immediately after Rosamund, protesting, had been sent to bed.

"Well, darling, Mirabel did go and have a baby without being married. And when Aunt Julie was young that was a terrible thing to do. We can't imagine, things have changed so much. But Aunt Julie has very strict ideas and she must think of Mirabel as a bad woman."

"I see," said James, who didn't quite. "And when she dies Mirabel won't be in her will, is that right?"

"I don't think we ought to talk about things like that."

"Certainly we shouldn't," said James's father.

"No, but I want to know. You're always saying people shouldn't keep things secret from children. Has Aunt Julie made a new will, cutting Mirabel out?"

"She hasn't made a will at all, that's the trouble. According to the law, a great niece doesn't automatically inherit if a person dies intestate—er, that is, dies—"

"I know what intestate means," said James.

"So I suppose Mirabel thought she could get her to make a will. It doesn't sound very nice put like that but, really, why shouldn't poor Mirabel have it? If she doesn't, I don't believe there's anyone else near enough and it will just go to the state."

"Shall we change the subject now?" said James's father.

"Yes, all right," said James. "Will you be going to the Women's Institute the same as usual on Wednesday?"

"Of course I will, darling. Why on earth do you ask?"

"I just wondered," said James.

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James's father was on holiday while the university was down and on the following day he went out into the fruit garden with a basket and his weeder and uprooted the thornapple plant that was growing between the gooseberry bushes. James, sitting in his bedroom, reading *The Natural History of Selborne*, watched him from the window. His father put the thornapple on the compost heap and went hunting for its fellows, all of which he found in the space of five minutes. James sighed but took this destruction philosophically. He had enough in the brown-paper bag for his needs.

As it happened, he had the house to himself for the making of his newest brew. His father announced at lunch that he would be taking the car into Bury St. Edmund's that afternoon and both children could come with him if they wanted to. Rosamund did. Bury, though not London, was at any rate a sizable town with plenty of what she liked—shops and restaurants and cinemas and crowds.

Once alone, James selected an enamel saucepan of the kind which looked as if all traces of *datura* could easily be removed from it afterward, put into it about a pint of water, and set this to boil. Meanwhile, he cut up the green spiny fruits to reveal the black seeds they contained. When the water boiled he dropped in the fruit pieces and the seeds and leaves and flowers and kept it all simmering for half an hour, occasionally stirring the mixture with a skewer.

Very much as he had expected, the bright green color had not been maintained, but the solid matter and the liquid had all turned a dark khaki-brown. James didn't dare use a sieve to strain it in case he couldn't get it clean again, so he let the pan and its contents cool and then he pressed all the liquor out with his hands until nothing remained but some soggy pulp.

This he got rid of down the waste-disposal unit. He poured the liquid, which had reduced to not much more than half a pint, into the medicine bottle he had ready for it, screwed on the cap, and labeled it: *datura stramonium*. The saucepan he scoured thoroughly but a few days later, when he saw that his mother had used it for boiling the peas they were about to eat with their fish for supper, he half expected the whole family to have griping pains and even tetanic convulsions. But nothing happened and no one suffered any ill effects.

By the time the new school term started, James had produced a substance he hoped might be muscarine from boiling the fly agaric fungus and some rather doubtful cyanide from apricot kernels. There were now ten bottles of poison on the top shelf of James's

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bookcase. But no one was in the least danger from them, and even when the Fyfield household was increased by two members there was no need for James to keep his bedroom door locked, for Mirabel's little boy was only six months old and naturally as yet unable to walk.

Mirabel's arrival had been entirely impulsive. A ridiculous way to behave, James's father said. The lease of her flat in Kensington was running out and instead of taking steps to find herself somewhere else to live, she had waited until the lease was within a week of expiration and had turned up in Great Sindon to throw herself on the mercy of Aunt Julie. She came by taxi from Ipswich station, lugging a suitcase and carrying the infant Oliver.

Mrs. Crowley had opened the door to her and she had never got so far as to see Aunt Julie. A message was brought back to say Mirabel was not welcome at Sindon Lodge as her aunt thought she had made clear enough by telephone and letter. Mirabel, who had believed that Aunt Julie would soften at the sight of her, had a choice between going back to London, finding a hotel in Ipswich, or taking refuge with the Fyfields. She told the taxi to take her to Ewes Hall Farm.

"How could I turn her away?" James heard his mother say. Mirabel was upstairs putting Oliver to bed. "There she was on the doorstep with that great heavy case and the baby screaming his head off, poor mite. And she's such a little scrap of a thing."

James's father had been gloomy ever since he got home. "Mirabel is exactly the sort of person who would come for the weekend and stay ten years."

"No one would stay here for ten years if they could live in London," said Rosamund.

In any event, Mirabel didn't stay ten years, though she was still there after ten weeks. And on almost every day of those ten weeks she tried in vain to get her foot in the door of Sindon Lodge. Whoever happened to be in the living room of Ewes Hall Farm in the evening—and in the depths of winter that was usually everyone—was daily regaled with Mirabel's grievances against life and with denunciations of the people who had injured her, notably Oliver's father and Aunt Julie. James's mother sometimes said that it was sad for Oliver having to grow up without a father, but since Mirabel never mentioned him without saying how selfish he was, the most immature, heartless, mean, lazy, and cruel man in London, James

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thought Oliver would be better off without him. As for Aunt Julie, she must be senile, Mirabel said, she must have lost her wits.

"Can you imagine anyone taking such an attitude, Elizabeth, in this day and age? She literally will not have me in the house because I've got Oliver and I wasn't married to Francis. Thank God I wasn't, that's all I can say. But wouldn't you think that sort of thing went out with the dark ages?"

"She'll come round in time," said James's mother.

"Yes, but how much time? I mean, she hasn't got that much, has she? And here am I taking shameful advantage of your hospitality. You don't know how guilty it makes me feel, only I literally have nowhere else to go. And I simply cannot afford to take another flat like the last—frankly, I couldn't raise the cash. I haven't been getting the contracts like I used to before Oliver was born and of course I've never had a penny from that unspeakable, selfish, pig of a man."

James's mother and father would become very bored with all this but they could hardly walk out of the room. James and Rosamund could, though after a time Mirabel took to following James up to the glory-hole where she would sit on his bed and continue her long, detailed, repetitive complaints just as if he were her own contemporary.

It was a little disconcerting at first, though he got used to it. Mirabel was about 30 but to him and his sister she seemed the same age as their parents, middle-aged, old, much as anyone did who was over, say, 22. And until he got accustomed to her manner he hardly knew what to make of the way she gazed intensely into his eyes or suddenly clutched him by the arm. She described herself, frequently, as passionate, nervous, and highly strung.

She was a small woman and James was already taller than she. She had a small, rather pinched face with large prominent dark eyes and she wore her long hair hanging loose like Rosamund's. The Fyfields were big-boned, fair-haired people with ruddy skins, but Mirabel was dark and very thin, and her wrists and hands and ankles and feet were very slender and narrow. There was, of course, no blood relationship, Mirabel being Aunt Julie's own sister's granddaughter.

Mirabel was not her baptismal name. She had been christened Brenda Margaret, but it had to be admitted that the name she had chosen for herself suited her better, suited her feyness, her intense smiles and brooding sadnesses, and the clinging clothes she wore, the muslins and the trailing shawls. To go into the village she

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always wore a cloak or a cape and James's mother said she couldn't remember Mirabel ever having possessed a coat.

James had always had rather a sneaking liking for her, he hadn't known why. But now that he was older and saw her daily, he understood something he had not known before. He liked Mirabel, he couldn't help himself, because she seemed to like him so much and because she flattered him. It was funny, he could listen to her flattery and distinguish it for what it was, but this knowledge did not detract a particle from the pleasure he felt in hearing it.

"You're absolutely brilliant for your age, aren't you, James?" Mirabel would say. "I suppose you'll be a professor one day. You'll probably win the Nobel prize."

She asked him to teach her things: how to do Pythagoras' Theorem, how to convert Fahrenheit temperatures to Celsius, ounces into grams, how to change the plug on her hair dryer.

"I'd like to think Oliver might have half your brains, James, and then I'd be quite content. Francis is clever, mind you, though he's so immature and lazy with it. I literally think *you're* more mature than he is."

Aunt Julie must have known for a long time that Mirabel was staying with the Fyfields, for nothing of that kind could be concealed in a village of the size of Great Sindon, but it was December before she mentioned the matter to James. They were sitting in front of the fire in the front sitting room at Sindon Lodge, eating crumpets toasted by Mrs. Crowley and drinking Earl Grey tea, while Palmerston stretched out on the hearthrug. Outside a thin rain was driving against the windowpanes.

"I hope Elizabeth knows what she's doing, that's all. If you're not careful you'll all be stuck with that girl for life."

James said nothing.

"Of course you don't understand the ins and outs of it at your age, but in my opinion your parents should have thought twice before they let her come into their home and bring her illegitimate child with her." Aunt Julie looked at him darkly and perhaps spitefully. "That could have a very bad effect on Rosamund, you know. Rosamund will think immoral behavior is quite all right when she sees people like Mirabel getting rewarded for it."

"She's not exactly *rewarded*," said James, starting on the tea cakes and the greengage jam. "We don't give her anything but her food and she has to sleep in the same room with Oliver." This seemed to him by far the worst aspect of Mirabel's situation.

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Aunt Julie made no reply. After a while she said, looking into the fire, "How d'you think you'd feel if you knew people only came to see you for the sake of getting your money? That's all Madam Mirabel wants. She doesn't care about me, she couldn't care less. She comes here sweet-talking to Mrs. Crowley because she thinks once she's in here I'll take her back and make a will leaving everything I've got to her and that illegitimate child of hers. How d'you think you'd like it? Maybe you'll come to it yourself one day, your grandchildren sucking up to you for what they can get."

"You don't *know* people come for that," said James awkwardly, thinking of Rosamund.

Aunt Julie made a sound of disgust. "Aaah!" She struck out with her arthritic hand as if she were pushing something away. "I'm not green, am I? I'm not daft. I'd despise myself, I can tell you, if I pretended it wasn't as plain as the nose on my face what you all come for."

The fire crackled and Palmerston twitched in his sleep.

"Well, I don't," said James.

"Don't you now, Mr. Pure and Holy?"

James grinned. "There's a way you could find out. You could make a will and leave your money to other people and tell me I wasn't getting any—and then see if I'd still come."

"I could, could I? You're so sharp, James Fyfield, you'll cut yourself badly one of these fine days."

Her prophecy had a curious fulfillment that same evening. James, groping about on the top shelf of his bookcase, knocked over the bottle of muscarine and cut his hand on the broken glass. It wasn't much of a cut but the stuff that had been inside the bottle got on it and this gave him a very uncomfortable and anxious hour. Nothing happened, his arm didn't swell up or go black or anything of that sort, but it made him think seriously about the other nine bottles remaining. Wasn't it rather silly to keep them? That particular interest of his, no longer compelling, he was beginning to see as childish. Besides, with Oliver in the house, Oliver who was crawling now and would soon walk, to keep the poisons might be more than dangerous, it might be positively criminal.

His mind made up, he took the bottles down without further vacillation and one by one he poured their contents down his bedroom washbasin. Some of them smelled dreadful. The henbane smelled like the inside of his mouse cage used to when he hadn't cleaned it out for a day. He poured them all away with one exception. He

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couldn't quite bring himself to part with the *datura*. It had always been his pride, better even than the nightshade.

Sometimes he had sat there at his desk, doing his homework, and glanced up at the *datura* bottle and wondered what people would think if they had known he had the means in his bedroom to dispose of (probably) half of the village. He looked at it now, recalling how he had picked the green spiny thornapples in the nick of time before his father had uprooted all the beautiful and sinister plants—he looked at it and replaced it on the top shelf. Then he sat down at the desk and did his Latin homework.

Mirabel was still with them at Christmas. On Christmas Eve she carried up to Sindon Lodge the pale blue knitted jumper, wrapped in holly-patterned paper, the two-pound box of chocolates, and the poinsettia in a golden pot she had bought for Aunt Julie. And she took Rosamund with her. Rosamund wore her new scarlet coat with the white fur which was a Christmas present in advance, and the scarf with Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London printed on it which was another, and Mirabel wore her dark blue cloak and her angora hat and very high-heeled gray suede boots that skidded dangerously on the ice. Oliver was left behind in the care of James's mother.

But if Mirabel had thought that the presence of Rosamund would provide her with an *entré* to the house she was mistaken. Mrs. Crowley, with a sorrowful expression, brought back the message that Aunt Julie could see no one. She had one of her gastric attacks, she was feeling very unwell, and she never accepted presents when she had nothing to give in return. Mirabel read a great deal, perhaps more than had been intended, into this valedictory shot.

"She means she'll never have anything to give me," she said, sitting on James's bed. "She means she's made up her mind not to leave me anything."

It was a bit—James sought for the word and found it—a bit *degrading* to keep hanging on like this for the sake of money you hadn't earned and had no real right to. But he knew better than to say something so unkind and moralistic. He suggested tentatively that Mirabel might feel happier if she went back to her designing of textiles and forgot about Aunt Julie and her will. She turned on him in anger.

"What do you know about it? You're only a child. You don't know what I've suffered with that selfish brute of a man. I was left all

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alone to have my baby, I might have been literally destitute for all he cared, left to bring Oliver up on my own and without a roof over my head. How can I work? What am I supposed to do with Oliver? Oh, it's so unfair. Why shouldn't I get her money? It's not as if I was depriving anyone else, it's not as if she'd left it to someone and I was trying to get her to change anything. If I don't get it it'll just go to the government."

Mirabel was actually crying by now. She wiped her eyes and sniffed. "I'm sorry, James, I shouldn't take it out on you. I think I'm just getting to the end of my tether."

James's father had used those very words earlier in the day. He was getting to the end of his tether as far as Mirabel was concerned. Once get Christmas over and then if James's mother wouldn't tell her she had outstayed her welcome, he would. Let her make things up with that chap of hers, Oliver's father, or get rooms somewhere or move in with one of those arty London friends. She wasn't even a relation, he didn't even like her, and she had now been with them for nearly three months.

"I know I can't go on staying here," said Mirabel to James when hints had been dropped, "but where am I to go?" She cast her eyes heavenward or at least as far as the top shelf of the bookcase where they came to rest on the bottle of greenish-brown liquid labeled: *Datura stramonium*.

"What on earth's that?" said Mirabel. "What's in that bottle? *Datura* whatever-it-is, I can't even pronounce it. It isn't cough mixture, is it? It's such a horrible color."

Six months before, faced with that question, James would have hedged or told a lie. But now he felt differently about those experiments of his, and he also had an obscure feeling that if he told Mirabel the truth and she told his mother, he would be forced to do something his own will refused to compel him to and throw the bottle away.

"Poison," he said laconically.

"*Poison?*"

"I made it out of something called Jimson's Weed or thornapple. It's quite concentrated. I should think a dose of it might be lethal."

"Were you going to kill mice with it or something?"

James would not have dreamed of killing a mouse or, indeed, any animal. It exasperated him that Mirabel who ought to have known him quite well, who had lived in the same house with him and talked to him every day, should have cared so little about him and

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been so uninterested in his true nature as not to be aware of this.

"I wasn't going to kill anything with it. It was just an experiment."

Mirabel gave a hollow ringing laugh. "Would it kill *me?* Maybe I'll come up here while you're at school and take that bottle and—and put an end to myself. It would be a merciful release, wouldn't it? Who'd care? Not a soul. Not Francis, not Aunt Julie. They'd be glad. There's not a soul in the world who'd miss me."

"Well, Oliver would," said James.

"Yes, my darling little boy would, my Oliver would care. People don't realise I only want Aunt Julie's money for Oliver. It's not for me. I just want it to give Oliver a chance in life." Mirabel looked at James, her eyes narrowing. "Sometimes I think you're the only person on earth Aunt Julie cares for. I bet if you said to her to let bygones be bygones and have me back, she'd do it. I bet she would. She'd even make a will if you suggested it. I suppose it's because you're clever. She admires intellectuals."

"If I suggested she make a will in Oliver's favor, I reckon she just might," said James. "He's her great-great-nephew, isn't he? That's quite a good idea, she might do that."

He couldn't understand why Mirabel had suddenly become so angry, and with a shout of "Oh, you're impossible, you're as bad as the rest of them!" had banged out of his room. Had she thought he was being sarcastic? It was obvious she wanted him to work on Aunt Julie for her and he wondered if she had flattered him simply toward this end. Perhaps. But however that might be, he could see a kind of justice in her claim. She had been a good niece, or great-niece, to Aunt Julie, a frequent visitor to Sindon Lodge before the episode of Francis, a faithful sender of birthday and Christmas cards, or so his mother said, and attentive when Aunt Julie had been ill. On the practical or selfish side, getting Mirabel accepted at Sindon Lodge would take her away from Ewes Hall Farm where her presence frayed his father's temper, wore his mother out, made Rosamund sulk, and was beginning to bore even him.

So perhaps he would mention it to Aunt Julie on his next visit. And he began to plan a sort of strategy—how he would suggest a meeting with Oliver, for all old people seemed to like babies, and follow it up with persuasive stuff about Oliver needing a home and money and things to make up for not having a father. But, in fact, he had to do nothing. For Mrs. Crowley had been offered a better job in a more lively place and had suddenly departed, leaving Aunt Julie stiff with arthritis and in the middle of a gastric attack.

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She crawled to the door to let James in, a grotesque figure in red corduroy trousers and a green jumper, her thin body bent double, her witch's face framed in a woolly fuzz of gray hair, and behind her, picking his way delicately, Palmerston with tail erect.

"You can tell that girl she can come up here tonight if she likes. She'd better bring her illegitimate child with her. I don't suppose your mother wants him."

Aunt Julie's bark was worse than her bite. Perhaps, indeed, she had no real bite. When James next went to Sindon Lodge some three weeks later, Mirabel was settled in as if she had lived there all her life, Oliver was on the hearthrug where he had usurped Palmerston's place, and Aunt Julie was wearing Mirabel's Christmas present.

She hardly spoke to James while her great-niece was in the room. She lay back in her armchair with her eyes closed and though the young woman's clothes she wore gave her appearance a kind of bizarre mockery of youth, you could see now that she was very old. Recent upheavals had aged her. Her face looked as if it were made of screwed-up brown paper. But when Mirabel went away—was compelled to leave them by Oliver's insistent demands for his tea—Aunt Julie seemed to revive. She opened her eyes and said to James in her sharpest and most offhand tone, "This is the last time you'll come here, I daresay."

"Why do you say that?"

"I've made my will, that's why, and you're not in it." She cocked a distorted thumb in the direction of the door. "I've left the house and the furniture and all I've got to *her*. And a bit to someone else we both know."

"Who?" said James.

"Never you mind. It's not you and it's none of your business." A curious look came into Aunt Julie's eyes. "What I've done is leave my money to two people I can't stand and who don't like me. You think that's silly, don't you? They've both sucked up to me and danced attendance on me and told a lot of lies about caring for me. Well, I'm tired, I'm sick of it. They can have what they want and I'll never again have to see that look on their faces."

"What look?"

"A kind of greedy pleading. The kind of look no one ought to have unless she's starving. You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? You're as clever as they come but you don't know what life is, not yet you don't, how could you?"

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The old woman closed her eyes and there was silence in which the topmost log crumpled and sank into the heart of the fire with a rush of sparks, and Palmerston strode out from where he had taken refuge from Oliver, rubbed himself against James's legs, and settled down in the red glow to wash himself.

Suddenly Aunt Julie spoke. "I didn't want you corrupted, can you understand that? I didn't want to *spoil* the only one who means more than a row of pins to me. But I don't know . . . If I wasn't too old to stand the fuss there'd be, I'd go back on what I've done and leave the house to you. Or your mother, she's a nice woman."

"She's got a house."

"Houses can be sold, you silly boy. You don't suppose Madam Mirabel will *live* here, do you?" Mirabel must have heard that, James thought, as the door opened and the tea trolley appeared, but there was no warning Aunt Julie or catching of her eye. "I could make another will yet, I could bring myself to it. It's a woman's privilege, they say, to change her mind."

Mirabel looked cross and there was very little chance of conversation after that, as Oliver, when he was being fed or bathed or played with, dominated everything. He was a big child with reddish hair, not in the least like Mirabel but resembling, presumably, the mean and heartless Francis. He was now ten months old and walking—"into everything," as James's mother put it, and it was obvious he tired Aunt Julie whose expression became quite distressed when ear-bursting screams followed Mirabel's refusal to give him a second piece of chocolate cake.

Oliver's face and hands were wiped clean and he was put on the floor where he tried to eat pieces of coal out of the scuttle and when prevented, set about tormenting the cat. James got up to go and Aunt Julie clutched at his hand as he passed her chair, whispering to him with a long and meaning look, that virtue was its own reward.

It was not long before he discovered who the "someone else we both know" was. Aunt Julie wrote a letter to James's parents in which she told them she was leaving a sum of money to Rosamund in her will. Elizabeth Fyfield said she thought there was something very unpleasant about this letter and that it seemed to imply Rosamund had gone to Sindon Lodge with "great expectations" in mind. She was upset by it but Rosamund was jubilant. Aunt Julie had not said what the sum was but Rosamund was sure it must be thousands and thousands of pounds—half a million was the highest figure she mentioned—and with her birthday money (she was eleven

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on March first) she bought herself a book of photographs of London, mostly of streets in Mayfair, Belgravia, and Knightsbridge, so that she could decide which one to have her flat in.

"I think we made a great mistake in telling her," said James's father.

For Rosamund had taken to paying weekly visits to Sindon Lodge. She seldom went without some small gift for Aunt Julie, a bunch of snowdrops, a lop-sided pot she had made at school, a packet of peppermints.

"Wills can be changed, you know," said James.

"That's not why I go. Don't you dare say that! I go because I love her. You're just jealous of me and you haven't been to see her for weeks and weeks."

It was true. He realized that Rosamund had indeed been corrupted and he, put to the test, had failed. Yet it was not entirely disillusionment or pique which kept him from Sindon Lodge but rather a feeling that it must be wrong to manipulate people in this way. He had sometimes heard his father use the expression "playing God" and now he understood what it meant. Aunt Julie had played God with him and with Rosamund and with Mirabel too. Probably she was still doing it, hinting at will-changing each time Mirabel displeased her. So he would go there to defy this manipulating, not to be a puppet moved by her strings. He would go on the following day on his way home from school.

But although he went as he had promised himself he would, to show her his visits were disinterested and that he could stick to his word, he never saw her alive again. The doctor's car was outside when he turned in at the gate. Mirabel let him in after he had rung the bell three times, a harassed pale Mirabel with Oliver fretful in her arms. Aunt Julie had had one of her gastric attacks, a terrible attack which had gone on all night. Mirabel had not known what to do and Aunt Julie had refused to let her call an ambulance—she wouldn't go to the hospital. The doctor had come first thing and had come back later and was with her now.

She had had to scrub out the room and actually *burn* the sheets, Mirabel said darkly. The mess had been frightful, worse than James could possibly imagine, but she couldn't have let the doctor see her like that. Mirabel said she hoped the worst was over but she didn't look very hopeful, she looked unhappy. James went no further inside than the hall. He said to tell Aunt Julie he had come, please not to forget, and Mirabel said she wouldn't. He walked away slowly.

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Spring was in the air and the neat, symmetrical front garden of Sindon Lodge was full of daffodils, their bent heads bouncing in the breeze. At the gate he met Palmerston coming in with the corpse of a field mouse dangling from his mouth. Without dropping his booty, Palmerston rubbed himself against James's legs and James stroked him, feeling rather depressed.

Two days later Aunt Julie had another attack and it killed her. Or the stroke which she had afterward killed her, the doctor said. The cause of death on the certificate was "Food poisoning and cerebral haemorrhage," according to Mrs. Hodges who had been Aunt Julie's cleaner and who met James's mother in the village. Apparently, on death certificates the doctor has to put down the main cause and the contributory cause, which was another piece of information for James to add to his increasing store.

James's parents went to the funeral and of course Mirabel went too. James did not want to and it never crossed his mind that he would be allowed to on a school day, but Rosamund cried when they stopped her from going. She wanted to have her red and white coat dyed black and to carry a small bouquet of violets. The provisions of the will were made known during the following days, though there was no dramatic will-reading after the funeral as there is in books.

Sindon Lodge was to go to Mirabel and so was all Aunt Julie's money with the exception of Rosamund's "bit," and bit, relatively speaking, it turned out to be. Five hundred pounds. Rosamund cried (and said she was crying because she missed Aunt Julie) and then she sulked, but when the will was proved and she actually got the money, when she was shown the check and it was paid into her Post Office Savings account, she cheered up and became quite sensible. She even confided to James, without tears or flounces, that it would have been a terrible responsibility to have half a million and she would always have been worried that people were only being nice to her because of her money.

James got Palmerston. It was set out in the will, her cat described and mentioned by name, and bequeathed "if the animal should survive me, to James Alexander Fyfield, of Ewes Hall Farm, Great Sindon, he being the only person I know that I can trust."

"What an awful thing to say," said Mirabel. "Imagine, literally to have a thing like that written down. I'm sure James is welcome to it. I should certainly have had it destroyed, you can't have a cat about the place with a baby."

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Palmerston had lived so long at Sindon Lodge that he was always going back there, though instinctively he kept out of Mirabel's way. For Mirabel, contrary to what Aunt Julie had predicted, did not sell the house. Nor did she make any of those changes the village had speculated about when it knew she was not going to sell. Sindon Lodge was not painted white with a blue front door or re-carpeted or had its kitchen fitted out with the latest gadgets. Mirabel did nothing ostentatious, made no splash, and bought herself nothing but a small and modest car. For a while it seemed as if she were lying low, keeping herself to herself, mourning in fact, and James's mother said perhaps they had all misjudged her and she had really loved Aunt Julie after all.

Things began to change with the appearance on the scene of Gilbert Coleridge. Where Mirabel had met him no one seemed to know, but one day his yellow Volvo car was seen outside Sindon Lodge, and on the next Mirabel was seen in the passenger seat of that car, and within hours it was all over the village that she had a man friend.

"He sounds a nice suitable sort of person," said James's mother, whose bush telegraph system was always sound. "Two or three years older than she and never had a wife—well, you never know these days, do you?—and already a partner in his firm. It would be just the thing for Oliver. He needs a man about the house."

"Let's hope she has the sense to marry this one," said James's father.

But on the whole, apart from this, the Fyfield family had lost interest in Mirabel. It had been galling for them that Mirabel, having got what she wanted with their help—first, the *entré* to Sindon Lodge and then the possession of it—had lost interest in *them*. She was not to be met with in the village because she scarcely walked anywhere if she could help it, and although Rosamund called several times, Mirabel was either not at home or else too busy to ask anyone in.

James overheard his mother saying that it was almost as if Mirabel felt she had said too much while she stayed with them, had shown too openly her desires, and now that these were gratified, wanted as little as possible to do with those who had listened to her confidences. But it suited the Fyfields equally, for the arrival of Mirabel was always followed by trouble and by demands.

The summer was hotter and dryer than the previous one had been,

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and the soft fruit harvest was exceptionally good. But this year there was no Aunt Julie to cast a cynical eye over baskets of raspberries. And Jimson's weed, *datura*, the thornapple, did not show itself in the Fyfields' garden or, apparently, in any part of Great Sindon. A "casual," as the wild-plant book described it, it had gone in its mysterious way to ground or else wandered to some distant place away over the meadows.

Had it appeared, it would have exercised no fascination over James. He had his thirteenth birthday in June and he felt immeasurably, not just a year, older than the previous summer. For one thing, he was about six inches taller—he had "shot up," as his mother said—and sometimes the sight in a mirror of this new towering being could almost alarm him. He looked back with incredulous wonder on the child he had been, the child who had boiled noxious fruits and leaves in a pot, who had kept white mice in a cage and caterpillars in a box. He had entered his teens and put away childish things.

Perhaps it was his height that led directly to the drama—"the absolutely worst day of my life," Rosamund called it—or it might have been Mrs. Hodges's operation or even the fact that, for once in a way, the Women's Institute met on a Tuesday rather than a Wednesday. It might have been any of those factors, though most of all it happened because Mirabel was inevitably and unchangingly Mirabel.

The inhabitants of Ewes Hall Farm knew very little about her life since they hardly ever saw her. It came as a surprise to Elizabeth Fyfield to learn how much time Mrs. Hodges had been spending sitting in with Oliver or minding him in her own home. It was Mrs. Hodges's daughter who told her, at the same time as she told her that her mother would be three weeks in the hospital having her hysterectomy and another goodness-knows-how-many convalescing. Mirabel would have to look elsewhere for a baby-sitter.

She looked, as they might have known she would, to the Fyfields.

Presenting herself on their doorstep with Oliver on one arm and a heavy shopping basket on the other, she greeted James's mother with a winsome, nervous smile. It might have been last year all over again, except that Oliver was a little boy now and no longer a baby. James, home for the long summer holidays, heard her sigh with despair and break into a long apology for having "neglected" them so long. The fact was she was engaged to be married. Did Elizabeth know that?

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"I hope you'll be very happy, Mirabel."

"Gilbert will make a marvelous father," said Mirabel. "When I compare him with that stupid, immature oaf, that Francis, it just makes me—oh, well, that's all water under the bridge now. Anyway, Elizabeth dear, what I came to ask you was, do you think James or Rosamund would do some baby-sitting for me? I'd pay them the going rate, I'd pay them what I pay Mrs. Hodges. Only it's so awful for me never being able to go out with my fiancé, and actually tomorrow I'm supposed to be meeting his parents for the first time. Well, I can't take a baby of Oliver's age to a dinner party, can I?"

"Rosamund's out of the question," said James's mother, and she didn't say it very warmly. "She's only eleven. I couldn't possibly let her have sole charge of Oliver."

"But James would be all right, wouldn't he? James has got so *tall*, he looks almost a grown man. And James is terribly mature, anyway."

His mother didn't answer that. She gave one of those sighs of hers that would have effectively prevented James asking further favors. It had no effect on Mirabel.

"Just this once. After tomorrow I'll stay at home like a good little mum and in a month Mrs. Hodges will be back. Just from seven till—well, eleven would be the absolute latest."

"I'll sit with Oliver," said James's mother.

Mirabel's guarantee came to nothing, however, for far from staying at home with Oliver, she turned up at Ewes Hall Farm three days later, this time to leave Oliver with them while she went shopping with Gilbert's mother. She was gone for four hours. Oliver made himself sick from eating toffees he found in Rosamund's room and he had uprooted six house plants and stripped off their leaves before James caught him at it.

Next time, James's mother said, she would put her foot down. She had already promised to sit with Oliver on the coming Saturday night. That she would do and that must be the end of it. And this resolve was strengthened by Mirabel's failure to return home until half-past one on Sunday morning. She would have told Mirabel so in no uncertain terms, Elizabeth Fyfield told her family at breakfast, but Gilbert Coleridge had been there and she had not wanted to embarrass Mirabel in front of him.

On Tuesday, the day to which the Women's Institute meeting had been put forward, the fine weather broke with a storm which gave

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place by the afternoon to steady rain. James was spending the day turning out the glory-hole. He had been told to do it often enough and he had meant to do it, but who would be indoors in a stuffy bedroom when the sun is shining and the temperature in the eighties? That Tuesday was a very suitable sort of day for disposing of books one had outgrown, tanks and cages and jars that were no longer inhabited, for throwing away collections that had become just boxes full of rubbish, for making a clean sweep on the path to adulthood.

Taking down the books from the top shelf, he came upon an object whose existence he had almost forgotten—the bottle labeled *datura stramonium*. That was something he need not hesitate to throw away. He looked at it curiously, at the clear greenish-brown fluid it contained and which seemed in the past months to have settled and clarified. Why had he made it and what for? In another age, he thought, he might have been an alchemist or a warlock, and he shook his head ruefully at the juvenile James who was no more.

So many of these books held no interest for him any longer. They were kids' stuff. He began stacking them in a "wanted" and an "unwanted" pile on the floor. Palmerston sat on the window sill and watched him, unblinking golden eyes in a big round gray face. It was a good thing, James thought, that he had ceased keeping mice before Palmerston arrived. Perhaps the mouse cage could be sold. There was someone in his class at school who kept hamsters and had been talking of getting an extra cage. It wouldn't do any harm to give him a ring.

James went down to the living room and picked up the receiver to dial Timothy Gordon's number. The phone was dead. There was no dial tone, only a silence broken by occasional faint clicks. He would have to go up the lane to the call-box and phone the repair service, but not now, later. It was pouring with rain.

As he was crossing the hall and was almost at the foot of the stairs, the doorbell rang. His mother had said something about the laundry coming. James opened the door absent-mindedly, prepared to nod to the man and take in the laundry box, and saw instead Mirabel.

Her car was parked on the drive and staring out of its front window was Oliver, chewing something, his fingers plastering the glass with some kind of stickiness. Mirabel was dressed up to the nines, as Aunt Julie might have said, and dressed very unsuitably for the weather in a trailing cream-colored pleated affair with beads round

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her neck and two or three chiffon scarves and pale pink stockings and cream shoes that were all straps no thicker than bits of string.

"Oh, James, you are going to be an angel, aren't you, and watch Oliver for me just for the afternoon? You won't be on your own, Rosamund's in—I saw her looking out of her bedroom window. I did try to ring you but your phone's out of order."

Mirabel said this in an accusing tone as if James had purposely broken the phone himself. She was rather breathless and seemed in a hurry.

"Why can't you take him with you?" said James.

"Because, if you must know, Gilbert is going to buy me something rather special and important and I can't take a baby along."

Rosamund, under the impression that excitement was afoot, appeared at the bend in the staircase.

"It's only Mirabel," said James.

But Mirabel took the opportunity, while his attention was distracted, of rushing to the car—her finery getting much spotted with rain in the process—and seizing the sticky Oliver.

"You'd like to stay with James and Rosamund, wouldn't you, sweetheart?"

"Do we have to?" said Rosamund, coming downstairs and bestowing on Oliver a look of such unmistakable distaste that even Mirabel flinched—flinched but didn't give up. Indeed, she thrust Oliver at James, keeping his sticky mouth well clear of her dress, and James had no choice but to grab hold of him. Oliver immediately started to whine and hold out his arms to his mother.

"No, darling, you'll see Mummy later. Now listen, James. Mrs. Hodges's daughter is going to come for him at five thirty. That's when she finishes work. She's going to take him back to her place and I'll pick him up when I get home. And now I must fly, I'm meeting Gilbert at three."

"Well!" exploded Rosamund as the car disappeared down the drive. "Isn't she the end? Fancy getting lumbered with *him*. I was going to do my holiday art project."

"I was going to turn my room out, but it's no good moaning. We've got him and that's that."

Oliver, once the front door was closed, had begun to whimper.

"If it wasn't raining we could go in the garden. Or take him out for a walk."

"It *is* raining," said James. "And what would we take him in? Mum's basket on wheels? The wheelbarrow? In case you hadn't

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noticed, dear Mirabel didn't think to bring his push chair. Come on, let's take him in the kitchen. The best thing to do with him is feed him. He shuts up when he's eating."

In the larder James found a packet of Penguin biscuits, the chocolate-covered kind, and gave one to Oliver, who sat on the floor and ate it, throwing down little bits of red and gold wrapping paper. Then he opened the saucepan cupboard and began taking out all the pots and pans and the colander and the sieves, getting chocolate all over the white Melamine finish on the door. Rosamund wiped the door and then she wiped him which made him hit out at her with his fists. When the saucepans were spread about the floor, Oliver opened all the drawers one after the other and took out cutlery and cheese graters and potato peelers and dishcloths and dusters.

James watched him gloomily. "I read somewhere that a child of two, even a child with a very high IQ, can't ever concentrate on one thing for more than nineteen minutes at a time."

"And Oliver isn't two yet and I don't think his IQ's all that amazing."

"Exactly," said James.

"Ink," said Oliver. He kicked the knives and forks out of his way and came to James, hitting out with a wooden spoon. "Ink."

"Imagine him with ink," said Rosamund.

"He's probably not saying ink. It's something else he means, only we don't know what."

"Ink, ink, ink!"

"If we lived in London we could take him for a ride on a bus. We could take him to the zoo."

"If we lived in London," said James, "we wouldn't be looking after him. I tell you what, I reckon he'd like television. Mirabel hasn't got television."

He picked Oliver up and carried him into the living room. The furniture in there was dark-brown leather and would not mark, so it seemed sensible to give him another Penguin. James switched the television on. At this time of day there wasn't much on of interest to anyone, let alone someone of Oliver's age, only a serial about people working at an airport. Oliver, however, seemed entranced by the colors and the movement, so James shoved him into the back of an armchair and with a considerable feeling of relief, left him.

There was a good deal of cleaning up to be done in the kitchen. Oliver had got brown stains on two tablecloths and James had to wash the knives and forks. Rosamund (typically, he thought) had

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vanished. Back to her art project, presumably, making some sort of collage with dried flowers. He put all the saucepans back and tidied up the drawers so that they looked much as they had before Oliver's onslaught. Then he thought he had better go back and see how Oliver was getting on.

The living room was empty. James could soon see why. The serial had come to an end and the bright moving figures and voices and music had been replaced by an old man with glasses talking about molecular physics.

Oliver wasn't anywhere downstairs. James hadn't really imagined he could climb stairs, but of course he could. He was a big strong boy who had been walking for months and months now.

He went up, calling Oliver's name. It was only a quarter past three and his mother wouldn't be back from the village hall until four thirty at the earliest. The rain was coming down harder now, making the house rather dark. James realized for the first time that he had left his bedroom door open. He had left it open—because Palmerston was inside—when he went down to phone Timothy Gordon about that mouse cage, and then Mirabel had come. It all seemed hours ago but it was only about forty minutes.

Oliver was in James's bedroom. He was sitting on the floor with the empty *datura* bottle clutched in his hands, and from the side of his mouth trickled a dribble of brown fluid.

James had read in books about people being rooted to the spot and that was exactly what happened to him at that moment. He seemed anchored where he stood. He stared at Oliver. In his inside there seemed to swell up and throb a large hard lump. It was his own heart beating so heavily that it hurt.

He forced himself to move. He took the bottle away from Oliver and automatically, he didn't know why, rinsed it out at the washbasin. Oliver looked at him in silence. James went down the hall and banged on Rosamund's door.

"Could you come, please? Oliver's drunk a bottle of poison. About half a pint."

"*What?*"

She came out. She looked at him, her mouth open. He explained to her, swiftly, shortly, in two sentences.

"What are we going to do?"

"Phone for an ambulance."

She stood in his bedroom doorway, watching Oliver. He had put

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his fists in his eyes. He was rubbing his eyes and making fretful little sounds.

"D'you think we ought to try and make him sick?"

"No. I'll go and phone. It's my fault. I must have been out of my tree making that stuff, let alone keeping it. If he dies . . . Oh, God, Roz, we can't phone! The phone's out of order. I was trying to phone Tim Gordon but it was dead and I was going to go down to the call-box and report it."

"You can go to a call-box now."

"That means you'll have to stay with him."

Rosamund's lip quivered. She looked at the little boy who was lying on the floor now, his eyes wide-open, his thumb in his mouth. "I don't want to. Suppose he dies?"

"You go then," said James. "I'll stay with him. Go to the call-box and dial nine-nine-nine for an ambulance and then go into the village hall and fetch Mum. Okay?"

"Okay," said Rosamund, and she went, the tears running down her face.

James picked Oliver up and placed him gently on the bed. There were beads of perspiration on the child's face but that might have been simply because he was hot. Mirabel had wrapped him very warmly for the time of year in a woolly cardigan as well as a jumper and a T-shirt. He had been thirsty, of course. That was what "ink" had meant—"ink" for "drink." Was there the slightest chance that during the year since he had made it, the *datura* had lost its toxicity? He did not honestly think so. He could remember reading somewhere that the poison was resistant to drying and to heat, so probably it was also resistant to time.

Oliver's eyes were closed now and some of the bright red color which had been in his face while he was watching television had faded. His fat cheeks looked waxen. At any rate, he didn't seem to be in pain, though the sweat stood in tiny glistening pinpoints on his forehead. James asked himself again why he had been such a fool to keep the stuff. An hour before he had been on the point of throwing it away and yet he had not. It was useless to have regrets, to "job backwards," as his father put it.

But James was looking at the future, not to the past. Suddenly he knew that if Oliver died he would have murdered him as surely, or almost as surely, as if he had fired at him with his father's shotgun. And his whole life, his entire future, would be wrecked. For he would never forgive himself, never recover, never be anything

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but a broken person. He would have to hide away, live in a distant part of the country, go to a different school, and when he left that school get some obscure job and drag out a frightened haunted existence. Gone would be his dreams of Oxford, of work in some research establishment, of happiness and fulfillment and success. He was not over-dramatising, he knew it would be so. And Mirabel? If his life would be in ruins, what of hers?

He heard the front door open and his mother came running up the stairs. He was sitting on the bed, watching Oliver, and he turned round slowly.

"Oh, James!"

And James said like a mature man, like a man three times his age, "There's nothing you can say to me I haven't already said to myself."

She touched his shoulder. "I know that," she said. "I know you." Her face was white, the lips too, and with anger as much as fear. "How dare she bring him here and leave him with two *children?*"

James hadn't the spirit to feel offended. "Is he—is he *dying?*"

"He's asleep," said his mother and she put her hand on Oliver's head. It was quite cool, the sweat had dried. "At least, I suppose he is. He could be in a coma, for all I know."

"It will be the end of me if he dies."

"James, oh, James . . ." She did something she had not done for a long time. She put her arms round him and held him close to her, though he was half a head taller than she.

"There's the ambulance," said James. "I can hear the bell."

Two men came upstairs for Oliver. One of them wrapped him in a blanket and carried him down in his arms. Rosamund was sitting in the hall with Palmerston on her lap and she was crying silently into his fur. It seemed hard to leave her but someone had to wait in for Mrs. Hodges's daughter. James and his mother got into the ambulance with Oliver and went with him to the hospital.

They had to sit in a waiting room while the doctors did things to Oliver—pumped his stomach, presumably. Then a young black doctor and an old white doctor came and asked James a whole string of questions. What exactly was the stuff Oliver had drunk? When was it made? How much had been in the bottle? And a host of other questions. They were not very pleasant to him and he wanted to prevaricate. It would be so easy to say he hadn't known what the stuff really was, that he had boiled the thornapples to make a green dye, or something like that. But when it came to it he couldn't. He

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had to tell the bald truth, he had to say he had made the poison, knowing it to be poison and knowing it might kill.

After they had gone away, there was a long wait in which nothing happened. Mrs. Hodges's daughter would have come by now and James's father would be home from where he was teaching at a summer seminar. It got to five thirty, to six, when a nurse brought them a cup of tea, and then there was another long wait.

James thought that no matter what happened to him in years to come, nothing could actually be worse than those hours in the waiting room. Just before seven the young doctor came back. He seemed to think James's mother was Oliver's mother and when he realized she was not, he just shrugged and said—as if they couldn't be all that anxious, as if it wouldn't be a matter of great importance to them— "He'll be okay. No need for you to hang about any longer."

James's mother jumped to her feet with a little cry.

"He's all right? He's really all right?"

"Perfectly, as far as we can tell. The stomach contents are being analyzed. We'll keep him in for tonight, though, just to be on the safe side."

The Fyfield family all sat up to wait for Mirabel. They were going to wait up no matter what time she came, even if she didn't come till two in the morning. A note, put into the letter box of Sindon Lodge, warned her what had happened and told her to phone the hospital.

James was bracing himself for a scene. On the way back from the hospital his mother had told him he must be prepared for Mirabel to say some very unpleasant things to him. Women who would foist their children onto anyone and often seemed indifferent to them were usually most likely to become hysterical when those children were in danger. It was guilt, she supposed. But James thought that if Mirabel raved she had a right to, for although Oliver had not died and would not, he might easily have. He was only alive because they had been very quick about getting that deadly stuff out of him.

Mirabel wouldn't be able to phone Ewes Hall Farm, for the phone was still out of order. They all had coffee at about ten and James's father, who had gone all over James's room to make sure there were no more killing bottles and had given James a stern but just lecture on responsibility, poured himself a large whiskey.

The yellow Volvo came up the drive at twenty to twelve. James sat tight and kept calm the way he had resolved to do while his

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father went to answer the door. He waited to hear a shriek or a sob. Rosamund had put her fingers in her ears.

The front door closed and there were footsteps. Mirabel walked in, smiling. She had a big diamond on the third finger of her left hand. James's mother got up and went to her, holding out her hands, looking into her face.

"You found our note? Of course you must have. Mirabel, I hardly know what to say to you . . ."

Before Mirabel could say anything James's father came in with the man she was going to marry, a big Teddy bear of a man with a handlebar mustache. James found himself shaking hands. It was all very different from what he had expected. And Mirabel was all smiles, vague and happy, showing off her engagement ring on her thin little hand.

"What did they say when you phoned the hospital?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't phone? But surely you—?"

"I knew he was all right, Elizabeth. I didn't want to make a fool of myself telling them he'd drunk half a pint of colored water, did I?"

James stared at her. And suddenly her gaiety fell from her as she realized what she had said. Her hand went up to cover her mouth and a dark flush mottled her face. She stepped back and took Gilbert Coleridge's arm.

"I'm afraid you underrate my son's abilities as a toxicologist," said James's father, and Mirabel took her hand down and made a serious face and said that of course they must get back so that she could phone at once.

James knew then. He understood. The room seemed to move round him in a slow circle and to rock up and down. He knew what Mirabel had done, and although it would not be the end of him or ruin things for him or spoil his future, it would be with him all his life. And in Mirabel's eyes he saw that she knew he knew.

But they were moving back toward the hall now in a flurry of excuses and thank-yous and good-nights, and the room had settled back into its normal shape and equilibrium. James said to Mirabel, and his voice had a break in it for the first time, "Good night. I'm sorry I was so stupid."

She would understand what he meant.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES HOLDING

It was found in 1873 in an attic trunk. A Scotsman bought it for six shillings and sold it to a dealer in Liverpool for $600. Not long ago it brought $800,000 at auction. No wonder—it's the only one of its kind in the world . . .

THE ONLY ONE OF ITS KIND

by JAMES HOLDING

Suddenly I began to sweat. My right hand, holding the tweezers, developed a perceptible tremor. A swirling neap tide, first of incredulity, then of growing excitement, swept through me with a rush, drowning lingering doubts, overwhelming my earlier skepticism.

Yes! Yes! I almost spoke aloud in my eagerness. The octagonal shape. The image of a sailing ship, crudely printed on magenta-colored paper of poor quality. The Latin inscription, badly smudged: *Damus Petimus Que Vicissim.* The initials E.D.W., also badly smudged, but legible nonetheless—the validating initials supposedly placed there to guard against forgery. How many years ago—one hundred and twenty-four? 1856. And the size was right.

Although I could feel upon me the anxious eyes of the young man across the counter, I did not look up. Instead I slowly, almost reluctantly, fixed the loupe in my eye with my left hand and tried to still the trembling of my right, so that I could bring the magnifying glass to bear on the tweezers and the stamp they held. Reluctantly? Yes. Because I couldn't believe this was happening to me; it was incredible, impossible; and I dreaded that a closer inspection through the loupe would wake me from my rosy dream to face the reality of bitter disappointment.

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After a long breath-held moment I put down the loupe and dropped the stamp into the small huddle of others I had already examined. Only then did I look up at the young man who had brought the stamps into my shop.

"Well?" he asked anxiously, "are they worth anything, Mr. Carmichael?"

I stifled a desire to shout. "Yes, there are several here that I think I could find a market for," I said easily. An eager light kindled in the boy's eyes. I continued, "Provided you want to sell them. And provided, of course, they are yours to sell. Excuse my bluntness, but you understand we must have some assurance that the stamps are not—ah—"

"Stolen? Don't worry about that. They're mine, all right. Two months ago my great grandmother died in England. I am her only surviving relative. So she left me everything she had—which wasn't much, poor old lady, after her funeral expenses were paid. About three hundred and thirty dollars, as a matter of fact, and a trunk full of family photographs, tintypes, documents, old letters, and assorted junk. Including this envelope of stamps. So they're mine, Mr. Carmichael."

He paused. "How much will you give me for them?"

"Slowly, son, slowly," I said with a smile. I turned the stamp envelope he indicated over and saw the words "Foreign Stamps" written on its face in faded ink. The envelope was yellow with age. I said tentatively, "Do you *know* anything about stamps, Mr. —?"

"Craddock," he said. "Not a thing. But these look old and seem to come from a lot of countries, so I thought maybe I could get a few bucks for them somewhere . . ." He let his words trail off, in a slightly embarrassed way. Then, with renewed eagerness, he asked, "Are they worth anything, Mr. Carmichael?"

I was judicious now. "Well, yes, some of them are worth something. Especially this one, Mr. Craddock." Studiously avoiding the octagonal magenta stamp I had examined last, I separated a U.S. 1861 Twelve from the score of stamps on my counter. "I'll be honest with you, Mr. Craddock." I held up the 1861 Twelve. The dignified face of George Washington stared up at me from the austere black stamp. "The last time one of these was sold at auction—in New Orleans, I think—it brought fifteen thousand dollars."

Mr. Craddock's eyes got big. "Fifteen grand!" He was almost incoherent with delight. "That thing? For just one little piece of paper?"

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I nodded benignly.

He said, "How about the others?" He was hearing, in his inner ear, the delicious tinkling of distant cash-register bells. And who could blame him? I was hearing them myself.

I cleared my throat. "Your stamps are all quite old, Mr. Craddock, and that's to their advantage. Yet none is really an outstanding value except for this one." I indicated the 1861 Twelve and paused portentously.

Unable to restrain his excitement any longer, Mr. Craddock said hoarsely, "So how much will you actually *give* me for them, Mr. Carmichael?"

"For the lot? For all of them?"

"The lot, yes. How much?"

I hesitated, as any canny stamp dealer would, and then said, "I am prepared to offer you twenty thousand dollars for the lot."

Mr. Craddock exploded. "Wow!" He smacked my counter top with his fist hard enough to rattle the windows. "You've got yourself a deal, Mr. Carmichael! Wait'll I tell Judy about this!"

"Judy?" I inquired politely, trying to quiet my racing pulse.

"We're getting married next week. What a wedding present twenty grand will make!"

"How very nice. You have my best wishes, Mr. Craddock." I slid his stamps back into their envelope and deposited it in my office safe.

I locked the safe, and turning back to him I said, "If you will accompany me to my bank, three doors away, I'll give you your wedding present at once. In cash."

He was stunned. "Twenty thousand dollars? Cash?"

"It looks like more that way," I joked. "And besides, I prefer to deal in cash—it's so much simpler. Okay?"

"Okay!" he said.

I made out the sales slip to read: Miscellaneous postage stamps $20,000.

I flew to Houston three days later. I went in a hurry, without luggage, without a hotel reservation, without anything but a noon appointment with Mr. Ferris Gilmore—and Mr. Craddock's magenta stamp in my pocket.

Ferris Gilmore is a multimillionaire. A fabulously successful oil wildcatter. His office was high in a glass-enclosed tower above the city and looked exactly the way I had imagined a multimillionaire's

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office would look—oriental rugs, fancy draperies, leather chairs, a desk half the size of a swimming pool. I'd never been in a multi-millionaire's office before.

Ferris Gilmore looked about as I'd expected a wealthy oil wildcatter to look—rugged, lined face, determined chin, curly dark hair, going gray, shoulders like a linebacker's, steady, no-nonsense brown eyes behind bifocal hornrims.

When his secretary ushered me into his office, he stood behind his desk to shake hands, then waved me courteously to a chair and offered me a cigar from a humidor on his desk. I refused it. So he lit up himself with a monogrammed gold lighter, sat back in his desk chair, and regarded me curiously through the drifting cigar smoke.

"Now then, Mr. Carmichael," he said genially, "what's all this vital new information you promised me—you *did* say 'vital,' didn't you?—about my British Guiana stamp?"

I took a deep breath. "Mr. Gilmore," I said, "the value of that stamp was misrepresented to you at the auction, as I think I can prove to your satisfaction. The misrepresentation was not deliberate, of course. Nevertheless, it resulted in your paying far too much money for the stamp."

Gilmore raised his eyebrows. "Eight hundred thousand dollars? I was delighted to get it for that."

I stared at him. "You mean you would have bid even higher?"

"Sure. If necessary. The price was largely immaterial. I wanted the stamp."

"I can understand that. As a hedge against inflation, as a long-term investment, you couldn't find anything more—"

He interrupted me. "Investment! I didn't buy the stamp as an investment, pal!" He laughed aloud, a bark of genuine amusement. "When I invest, it's in propositions a little more promising than a square inch of perishable paper. Didn't you read the newspaper accounts of that auction? They told why I bought the stamp."

I spread my hands in a disclaiming gesture. "I thought that was probably nothing but newspaper exaggeration to make a better story," I said.

"It was the truth."

"You really *did* spend a fortune for the stamp just because it was the only one of its kind in the world?"

"Sure. Why not? As a stamp dealer, you must know that the 1856 British Guiana One Cent stamp is unique. And I have this funny

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compulsion to own unique things, that's all." And the means to indulge your whims, I thought, looking around his elegant office. "Did you know that I've got the world's only six-legged steer on my ranch?" he went on. "And the only known harness plaque used by Alexander the Great?" He gave me a little boy's grin that went strangely with his graying hair and lined face. "You happen to see King Tut's gold sarcophagus lid when it was exhibited over here?"

I nodded. "You don't own that, do you?" I asked incredulously.

"No, but I made an offer for it, pal! Told 'em to name their own price. They laughed at me." Abruptly he abandoned his chatty manner. "You claim the value of my British Guiana stamp was misrepresented to me. In what way?"

"Well," I began, "the history of your stamp is well known, of course, but—"

"Sure. It was found in 1873 by a kid named Vaughan in a trunk in his attic. He sold it for six shillings to a Scot, who sold it for six hundred bucks to a Liverpool dealer and so on down the line at increasing sales prices to many different owners until now."—Gilmore tapped his chest triumphantly with a massive thumb—"*I've* got it. Paid eight hundred thousand for it, but it's all mine. And it's the only one of its kind in the world! Where's the misrepresentation in that?"

I said, "It's *not* the only one of its kind in the world, Mr. Gilmore. There's another."

"What!" Gilmore sat up with a jerk. "Don't try to kid me, pal! There's only one. And I've got it. What kind of a con are you trying to pull?"

"No con," I said. "The solemn truth."

"I don't believe it!"

Gently I prodded his memory. "I told you I could prove it, remember?"

He stared at me, his anger dying swiftly. "How?"

"I have the other stamp in my pocket," I said, "if you'd care to look at it."

"In your pocket?" He held out a hand. "Show me, pal. It'll be the first time I've ever seen an eight-hundred-thousand-dollar forgery."

I took the little protective transparent mount containing Mr. Craddock's stamp from my pocket stockbook and placed it on Gilmore's desk, face up.

He drew it toward him and examined it. I said, "It's genuine. Perhaps this will help," and I handed him my loupe. Wordlessly he

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removed his bifocals, screwed the loupe into his eye, and peered through it at the stamp for a full minute. Those sixty seconds seemed endless to me.

At last he handed back my loupe and pushed the stamp mount back to me. "Where in the living hell did you find that damn thing?" he asked irritably. I could tell from the chastened tone that he had accepted the stamp as genuine.

"Pure accident," I said. I proceeded to tell him about Mr. Craddock and his great grandmother, only I didn't mention Mr. Craddock by name. "As soon as I saw what this innocent youngster had," I explained, "I offered to represent him in securing a fair price for the stamp. He wants to sell it right away."

"Why?"

"He's getting married and needs the money."

Gilmore managed a smile. "Starting out on a shoestring, isn't that what they call it?" He replaced his bifocals and regarded me through them owlishly. "So why not auction the stamp off in the regular way? Why bring it to me?"

"Two reasons," I answered. "One, because a public auction would inevitably trumpet to the whole community of stamp collectors and dealers that there is suddenly a second 1856 British Guiana One Cent stamp in existence. Which would mean that *your* stamp is no longer unique. Which would prove a disaster for my client."

"A disaster?"

"Yes. Because then he wouldn't be able to get anything like a fair price for *his* stamp."

"Why not?"

"Because in this case the value is based on rarity. And obviously, two 1856 British Guiana Ones are only half as rare as one."

"If I were a kid about to get married, $400,000 would seem a pretty fair price to me," Gilmore observed drily.

"True. Except the value of stamps doesn't vary in direct proportion to their rarity. Not anywhere near. At auction the best bid we could probably expect on our stamp might be only an eighth or a tenth of what you paid for yours last month. Because our stamp would be only one of a matching pair, whereas yours, when you bought it, was unique—or thought to be."

Gilmore nodded. "The only one of its kind."

"And the minute the existence of our second stamp becomes public knowledge, the value of your stamp will drop like a dead weight."

In quick alarm Gilmore said, "You haven't mentioned this stamp

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of yours to anyone else, have you?"

"Not yet. That's the other reason I came to you with it. I felt it was only fair that you be alerted to what would happen to your stamp's value when the news of our stamp gets out."

His lips turned up in a half smile. "Never mind the hogwash, pal. You brought your stamp to me because you thought I'd give you a better price for it than you could get at auction, right?"

"The thought did occur to me," I conceded. "I hoped you might be willing to safeguard your investment by adding to it, as it were."

"In other words, you'll sell me your stamp at a healthy price so that my stamp will still be unique as far as anybody else knows?"

"Wrong," I said. "You don't give a damn what anybody else knows. Unless *you* know that your stamp is unquestionably the only one of its kind, you aren't interested in owning it. Right?"

Gilmore's wide shoulders lifted. "Maybe," he said. "So?"

"So I have a suggestion to offer."

"I'm way ahead of you, pal. But lay it on me."

I said, "You could buy my client's stamp. And then destroy it."

"So that my stamp would still be unique?"

"Exactly."

Gilmore ground out his cigar in the ashtray at his elbow. "I thought that would be it. What's your price?"

I said, "You confessed to me a few minutes ago that you would have bid higher at the auction to get your stamp. How much higher?"

He straightened in his chair. "Don't mess around with me, pal. Name your price."

I said, "One million dollars."

He laughed. "I'll give you four hundred thousand," he said, "which, according to your own statement, is a great deal more than you'd get for it at auction. Take it or leave it."

After two seconds of sober contemplation I accepted his offer. "Done," I said. "And you're getting a bargain, Mr. Gilmore. And I do mean a bargain."

He bobbed his head in agreement or contempt, I couldn't tell which. "Okay. Will you take my personal check?"

"Under the circumstances, don't you think an anonymous cashier's check would be more appropriate?"

"I'll have one in the mail for you tomorrow."

"I'd prefer it in my hand this afternoon, if it's all the same to you."

"My word isn't good enough for you?"

"Certainly it's good enough. I'm only trying to keep our trans-

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action tidy, that's all. Suppose I turned my stamp over to you now, you destroy it, and then suffer a fatal heart attack tonight before you can arrange to send me my check? I wouldn't have any proof at all that there *was* a transaction, would I?"

He grinned good-naturedly. "You may have a point there, pal. So wait right there in your chair and I'll get your check for you right now. One of my banks is here in the building." He looked at me sideways. "And incidentally, it *is* my bank, pal. I own it. So I'll only be a few minutes. Can I have my secretary get you a cup of coffee while I'm gone?"

"That would be nice," I said. "Thank you."

He left. In about three minutes his secretary appeared with my coffee. It was very good coffee. Probably made from a unique variety of coffee beans grown on a unique plantation owned by Mr. Gilmore.

Fifteen minutes later Gilmore returned with a cashier's check for me in the amount of $400,000. I counted the zeros before I accepted it, thanked him, and tucked the check carefully into my wallet.

Gilmore sat down behind his desk and took out his monogrammed gold lighter. "Now, then," he said, "give me that stamp."

"You're going to burn it?" I asked, impressed despite myself.

"What else?" he said. He held out a hand and snapped his gold lighter.

I made a long arm across his desk and held out the stamp in its transparent mount. "Allow me," I said, "to assist in this solemn ceremony. It will give me something to tell my grandchildren."

Gilmore laughed and touched his lighter flame to the small square of paper in my hand. The mount and the stamp inside burst into flame. I held it until it scorched my fingers, then dropped it into Gilmore's ashtray. We watched the tiny bonfire in silence until nothing but a curl of ash remained.

Gilmore stood up and said on a note of satisfaction, "That does it, pal. And believe me, I appreciate it. Thanks to you, I still own the *only* 1856 British Guiana One Cent stamp in the world."

He was wrong, of course. But understandably so. For how could he guess that before I became a stamp dealer I'd been a professional sleight-of-hand artist—and that the priceless stamp he thought he'd destroyed was still in my jacket pocket?

"Q"

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet novelet by

EDWARD D. HOCH

There is only one thief in all fiction, past and present—and in real life, past and present—who steals only the valueless. No jewels, no money, no paintings, sculptures, or rare books, no collectibles, no negotiable stocks or bonds—only objects that are literally worthless. And this time Nick's assignment is perhaps the most astonishing of his career—to steal a cobweb from a ghost town in Arizona. Resist that gambit if you can!

THE THEFT OF THE LOPSIDED COBWEB

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The winter of 1980 had been a mild one in the northeast, but Nick Velvet was still pleased to escape it for a few days with a flying trip to Arizona. He landed at Tucson International Airport on an afternoon when the temperature was hovering pleasantly around sixty-five, and drove his rented car with the window open as he searched for the motel east of the city where he was to meet Canfield Drake. Gloria had wanted to come with him on the trip, but he'd persuaded her it would be short and simple and he'd be back before she even missed him.

For an instant he had reason to doubt his promise when a little tan sports car shot out of an intersection and came within a hair of ramming into him. He laid on the horn and had a glimpse of a girl with flowing red hair take her hands off the wheel long enough to make an obscene gesture in his direction. Then she weaved through the traffic and was gone. He would have thought no more about it except that when he finally located the motel and pulled into a

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parking space the tan sports car, or its twin, was parked just two cars away.

Nick considered leaving a message of some sort under the wiper, but he decided that was a bit childish. He'd traveled across the country to do a job for someone, not to engage in petty feuds with lady motorists. He was to meet Canfield Drake in the cocktail lounge of the motel at four o'clock, and he was right on time as he entered and allowed a long-legged waitress to escort him to a corner table where his client waited.

Nick saw the red-haired girl at once, wearing tight jeans and a fringed western jacket, standing by the table in conversation with Drake. But as he approached she finished talking and moved away while Drake's gaze followed her with an appreciative eye. Then he saw Nick and stood up. "Good to see you again, Velvet. How's life back east?"

"Busy. I can't complain."

"Here. Have a seat. What are you drinking?"

"Just a glass of white wine for now, thanks. Who was the young lady you were chatting with?"

"Sara Kipling, the daughter of a business associate. Why do you ask?"

"She almost ran me off the road with her sports car."

Drake treated the incident lightly. "People drive wild out here. They're used to those desert roads, where you don't see another car for hours at a time. She's a good kid, though. Studying mining at the state university."

The waitress reappeared with his wine and Nick asked, "What do you need me for, Drake?" They'd known each other off and on for a few years, but they'd never progressed to a first-name basis.

"You've helped out some friends of mine. Now I need something stolen that's quite tricky. I don't know another person who could bring it off."

"It has to be without value, you know."

"Oh, it's without value, all right. A cobweb. I want you to steal a cobweb from a ghost town out in the desert."

"That should be easy enough. I'd suggest you go out there yourself with a broom and save my twenty-five thousand dollar fee."

"You don't understand. I want you to *steal* the cobweb, not destroy it. I want it delivered to me, intact. For that I'll pay twenty-five grand."

"All right," Nick agreed, not having the slightest idea how one

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went about stealing a cobweb. "How do I find it?"

"The ghost town is about a two-hour drive from here. We'll take a run out there in the morning and I'll show it to you. After that you're on your own."

"Fine."

"Any questions?"

"The obvious one. What makes it worth that much money to you?"

Canfield Drake smiled. "That, of course, is the question I can't answer." He stood up. "I took the liberty of reserving a room for you at this motel. It's as good as any. I'll pick you up in the lobby at nine tomorrow morning."

Nick spent the evening in his room with a couple of beers, watching television. The following day would be soon enough to ponder how—and why—one would steal a cobweb from a ghost town.

Canfield Drake was in the lobby on schedule, and they made the two-hour drive in his big white car. The energy crisis and the price of gasoline hadn't yet had an impact on people like Drake. "Beautiful country, isn't it?" he remarked as they drove.

The distant mountains were indeed beautiful, though the scene was a bit barren for Nick's taste. Occasionally they passed a few head of grazing cattle, but for the most part the landscape was merely empty. "I'm too much of a city person," he decided. "And I guess there must have been others once who shared my views, or you wouldn't have a ghost town out here."

"The town was for the mines. When the mines closed, the people had to leave. But this is history we're talking about here, Velvet. We're not far from Tombstone, or Cochise—a couple of names that are part of the southwestern heritage. The Fort Apache Indian Reservation is north of here. Hell, most of the state is Indian reservations."

He turned off the main highway and onto a dirt road that headed toward the mountains. They passed a weathered sign that Nick couldn't read, then started climbing as the terrain grew steeper. "Some places have turned their ghost towns into tourist attractions," Drake explained, "but nothing's been done with this one. It hasn't changed since the people moved out fifty years ago."

"What's the name of it?"

"Expression. Expression, Arizona. Crazy name for a town, but the Expression Silver Mining Company helped found it back around the turn of the century. They kept it going too, until things dried up in

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the stock-market crash. Expression Silver went under, and the town went under with it."

Presently the buildings came into view—a cluster of houses first, and then the main street itself with storefronts standing grandly before collapsed interiors. It reminded Nick of a movie set, something dreamed up for a television Western. "Exactly where is this special cobweb?"

"At the entrance to the old mine, straight ahead through the town."

They stopped before a number of tumbled buildings, one of which still bore the faded wooden sign proclaiming it the field office for the Expression Mining Company. Canfield Drake led the way up a slight incline to the mine entrance itself. It was blocked off with a fragile plywood wall into which was set a plain wooden door secured by a rusty padlock. It was across this door that some unseen spider had woven a truly majestic web. It was a good three feet in diameter, and though perfectly formed, what gave it a special distinction to Nick's eye was the fact that it was lopsided. The center of the cobweb was very definitely too far to the left.

"Looks as if it was woven by a drunken spider," Nick commented. "This is what you want stolen?"

"This is it."

"Why don't we just take it right now?"

"How?"

Nick started to reach out for it, but Drake stopped him. "Remember, it can't be destroyed. It must be brought to me exactly as it is here."

"I think I begin to see the light. You want the door blocking this old mine shaft removed."

"No, no! Don't touch the door! You can see that the cobweb is not really attached to the door but to the rocks on both sides."

"Is this like a horror movie?" Nick wondered. "Does a giant spider appear as soon as I touch its web?"

Canfield Drake smiled. "I certainly hope not. We do have some poisonous species of spiders in this part of the country, but I doubt if the builder of this web would harm you."

"All right," Nick agreed. "How soon do you want it?"

"Just as soon as you can deliver it to me."

"It's not really stealing, you know. The web doesn't belong to anyone."

"Doesn't it?" Drake answered enigmatically . . .

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When Drake dropped him off back in the city, Nick's first move was to pick up his car and drive out to the University. It took him only a few moments to locate the man who could help him. His name was Professor Felix Rittenhouse, and with horn-rimmed glasses and a neatly trimmed beard he looked exactly as Nick might have imagined him.

"Nick Velvet?" he asked, repeating the name as he extended his hand. "We've never met before, have we?"

"No, we haven't. They told me at the administration office that you're the resident expert on spiders."

Rittenhouse laughed aloud. "What a thing to be known for! But I suppose it's true enough. I'm an arachnologist, which means I study spiders, scorpions, mites, and ticks. What can I do for you?"

"I want to know about spider webs—cobwebs. I want to know how one goes about collecting them."

Professor Rittenhouse snorted. "Step this way and I'll show you."

Nick followed him into a high-ceilinged laboratory where shelves on three walls were lined with jars and glass-sided boxes. "These are terraria," the professor explained. "There's soil in there, and the wire screen over the top allows air to circulate. Of course each spider must be kept in a separate enclosure to prevent cannibalism."

Nick eyed the hairy, eight-legged creature with distaste. Then his attention was attracted to a row of large wooden frames with glass sides. In each was a perfect web. "This is what I wanted," Nick said. "How did you manage to collect these?"

"I didn't collect the webs, I collected the spiders. I placed one in each box and they spun the webs for me."

"Really?"

Nick bent closer and saw indeed that the spiders were still in the glass-sided frames with their creations.

"That's the only way to do it."

"But suppose I've found a really unique web, a lopsided one with the center off to the left. Something like that would probably be of value, wouldn't it?"

Professor Rittenhouse scoffed. "Pretty as they are, one hardly speaks of the *value* of spider webs. No one buys or sells them. They're too fragile—and too easy to come by."

"Even a lopsided one?"

"Oh, yes. Small doses of some drugs will cause a spider to change the pattern of its web, sometimes quite violently. A spider given a minute dose of LSD will temporarily spin highly irregular webs.

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Your lopsided web might have been caused by something the spider ate—a fly contaminated with pesticide, perhaps."

"Then such a cobweb would have no real value?"

Professor Rittenhouse smiled. "None at all. And by the way, the round, regular type of web you describe is technically an orb web. A cobweb is a more general term for any web or thread spun by a spider."

Nick kept staring at the big wooden frame with its glass sides. He noticed a couple of empty ones in the corner and asked, "Any chance I could borrow or rent one of those for a couple of days? I'm staying at the Speedway Motel. You can check with them if you want."

Rittenhouse eyed him for a moment. "All right, if it's that important you can borrow one. I'll want it back day after tomorrow."

"You'll have it."

Nick carried the frame out to his rented car, still not certain just how he'd go about using it.

By that time it was late afternoon and he knew the two-hour drive back to Expression would have to wait till morning. He went to the motel, leaving the cobweb frame locked safely in the trunk of the car.

He phoned Gloria back home to tell her he was all right, and then decided it was time for a drink. The long-legged waitress from the previous day remembered him. "I know just the table you want," she said, and before he realized what was happening she'd led him to that same corner table, occupied now by the redhead with the fast sports car.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake," Nick mumbled, trying to keep the waitress from pulling out the chair for him.

But Sara Kipling was more than willing to accept him. "It's time we met," she said, in a clear, cool voice.

Nick sat down hesitantly. "We nearly met yesterday. Your car almost hit mine."

"Did it?" She dismissed it as unimportant. Perhaps almost hitting cars was an everyday occurrence. Then she asked, "You're working for Canfield Drake, aren't you?"

"Yes." He told her his name.

"In what capacity?"

"That's confidential. If you want any information you'll have to get it from Drake."

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"Does it have anything to do with my father, Horace Kipling?"

"Not to my knowledge. I've never even heard his name before."

"He is—or was—a business associate of Drake's. They had a falling out. I've come to Canfield Drake a number of times, trying to protect my father's interests, but I don't trust him any further than I can see him."

"Believe me, it has nothing to do with your father," Nick assured her.

"You're from New York, aren't you?"

"Near there," Nick admitted.

"Canfield Drake is just the sort to bring in a hired gun."

"You're living in the Arizona of a hundred years ago. Just because there are towns like Tombstone nearby doesn't mean there are still hired guns to be brought in."

"I hope not. If anything happened to my father I think I'd kill the person responsible."

"You almost killed me yesterday. Try someone else next time."

She gathered up her purse and sunglasses. "It's no joke, Mr. Velvet." Then she was gone, leaving him alone at the table.

The waitress appeared just then, carrying a glass of white wine. "Same as yesterday?" she asked.

"Afraid not," Nick said. He handed her a couple of bills and left without touching the wine.

Sara Kipling's concern didn't bother him, but he'd just thought of something that might be far more important. It was a question he'd forgotten to ask Professor Rittenhouse.

He phoned the university from his room and happened to be in luck. Rittenhouse was still in his office. "Oh," he said, "the fellow who collects cobwebs! What can I do for you now?"

"I neglected to ask you a very important question. How long do spider webs last?"

On the other end of the line Professor Rittenhouse paused before answering. "You understand that the purpose of webs is to ensnare insects on which the spider feeds. For this purpose the silken strands are sticky to the touch. Every few days the webs dry and lose their stickiness—or they become torn by the weather or by large creatures."

"Like man."

"Exactly. If the spider is still there it'll generally repair the web, removing and eating the old parts and replacing them with newly spun segments. Under those conditions a web could last for weeks

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or months. In some old houses you might find abandoned webs that are years old, if they've been left undisturbed."

"Good. That helps me a great deal." At least he didn't have to worry about the web disintegrating overnight.

"When are you going after this web?"

"Tomorrow, I hope," Nick said. "Don't worry, I'll take good care of your frame."

The morning dawned warm and cloudless, with the temperature edging seventy as Nick retraced yesterday's route back to the ghost town of Expression. There seemed to be more traffic today, though much of it was inbound from the city's growing suburban tracts. After a time it dropped out, and he had the road to himself. In his mirror he could see one car way back, but that was all.

It was a simple assignment, he kept telling himself. The only trick was in somehow getting the cobweb into the frame, undamaged. He had the whole day to work on it, and nothing was likely to interfere with him—except perhaps the spider.

He almost missed the dirt road that led up into the mountains, but he saw it at the last moment and made the turn. After a time Nick caught sight of the weathered sign he hadn't been able to read before, and he stopped the car to read what it said. *No Trespassing—Private Property*, he made out, and wondered who had bothered to erect such a sign in the middle of nowhere. The lettering was crude, but he doubted if it had stood for fifty years.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw dust rise from the direction of the highway. The car he'd observed in the rear-view mirror had turned onto this same road. He wondered for the first time if he was being followed.

Nick lit a cigarette and waited, but the car seemed to have stopped up by the highway. It was too far back for him to see it clearly, and he couldn't tell whether or not it was the tan sports car that had almost hit him on his arrival. Finally, when the distant speck showed no sign of moving, he gave up the wait and drove on.

The town itself looked much as it had the previous day. Nothing had changed, and Nick had the impression nothing ever changed here. It was all frozen in time, under a desert sun, perhaps waiting for the days when western badmen would ride this way again. Nick drove as far as he could and then lifted the cobweb frame from his trunk, carrying it the rest of the way.

Until he saw the lopsided web still in place he had a terrible fear

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that something might have gone wrong. But it was there, glistening in the morning sun across the padlocked entrance to the old mine. He leaned the glass frame against the rocky hillside and studied the problem. On close examination the web looked quite old to him, and he saw no trace of the spider that had spun it. A little bit of paper was caught in one corner, driven there by the wind at some past time. The web itself was attached to the surrounding rocks at eight main points, with a few other strands supporting it but, as far as Nick could see, not really essential to its construction. If he could somehow work the frame behind the web, and then carefully remove the points of attachment one at a time—

His planning was cut short by the sudden crack of a rifle. The glass in his web frame shattered and Nick threw himself to the ground.

He was a clear target and he braced for a second shot to follow the first, but none came. After a moment he raised his head to try and spot the gunman, remembering the car that had seemed to be following him. But he saw no car and, at first, no person. Then a shock of white hair appeared over an outcropping of rock, followed by a grizzled face and hands holding a western-style carbine.

"Get outa here!" a voice yelled down at Nick. "Next time I won't miss!"

"I want to talk to you," Nick called back, scrambling to his feet. The carbine fired again, kicking up a bit of dust a few feet away. But by now Nick was convinced the old man was merely trying to scare him away.

"I warned you!"

"Put the gun down and let's talk."

"What about?"

Nick gestured at the smashed glass of the spider frame. "You broke my equipment."

"The mine belongs to me. I don't allow no trespassin' on my property."

"I'm not interested in the mine. I'm after that spider web."

The old man stood up now, fully revealing himself. He must have been in his seventies, with weathered skin that told of long years under the desert sun. As he came closer the leathery hands relaxed their grip on the carbine and he lowered the barrel. "You some sort of scientist?" he asked uncertainly.

"I collect spider webs. See that frame you broke? I was going to put the web inside it."

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The old man grunted. "What's your name?"

"Nick Velvet. Professor Nick Velvet from the university."

"Well, I'm Jack Yeager an' this is all my property. Didn't anyone tell you it was mine?"

"No," Nick replied, but he was remembering Drake's enigmatic comment when Nick had said the web didn't belong to anyone. Drake obviously had known about the old man's claim on the land, but for some reason hadn't mentioned it. "I was up here yesterday and no one was around."

"Got a lot of land to guard. Didn't you see my sign sayin' to keep out?"

"I thought the land was owned by the Expression Mining Company."

"It was, long time ago. But they left it and the bank took it over. I just moved in and staked my claim. It's all mine, far as you can see. I live here."

Nick glanced back at the deteriorating buildings. "It's a ghost town, Mr. Yeager. No one lives there."

"I do."

"How do you get your food?"

"I hike into the village every month or so."

Nick got the conversation back to the business at hand. "What about the spider web? Can I have it?"

"Sure you're not tryin' to get into the old mine?"

"Of course not. Why should I do that?"

"For the silver! It's a silver mine, ain't it?"

Nick remembered a newspaper story about the high price of silver causing some abandoned mines to reopen. "I don't care about the mine," he insisted. "I just collect spider webs."

"In that there glass frame?"

"Yes, before you smashed it with your bullet."

Suddenly the carbine came up again. "Nobody collects spider webs, mister. They ain't worth nuthin'. You're plain lyin' to me."

Nick Velvet acted in the same instant. Before the rifle barrel had climbed high enough to be level with his chest, he moved in close and stiff-armed it to one side. Then he toppled the old man backward as gently as he could. "Just calm down. I'm not going to hurt you," he reassured his captive, quickly kicking the carbine out of reach.

"You can't take the silver!" the old man yelled. "It's mine!"

"Calm down, will you?" Jack Yeager had been carrying a canvas knapsack along with the carbine, and Nick quickly yanked two

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leather straps free from it. He used one to tie the man's ankles and the other to secure his wrists behind his back.

"Let me loose!"

"I will, in time. Now keep quiet or I'll have to gag you." He went through the contents of the knapsack, finding a few cans of food, some extra cartridges for the carbine, and a folded plastic poncho. That was just what he needed.

Working quickly but carefully, Nick used the rifle barrel to knock away the shards of broken glass from the frame. Then he took a knife from his pocket and cut the plastic poncho into two pieces large enough to replace the glass sides of the web frame. Next he went to work on the web itself. The main portion would fit nicely into the frame if he cut away some of the bottom strands. He did this, working the wooden frame under the web and then up behind it, in the space between the web and the locked mine entrance. The absence of glass sides actually made his task easier as he carefully cut each supporting thread of the cobweb and transferred it to the inside of the wooden frame, holding it in place with a tiny piece of transparent tape which he had brought with him.

It was slow work, and tedious, but after some twenty minutes Nick had succeeded in transferring the cobweb intact to the frame. Then he carefully taped the pieces of plastic poncho over the sides to protect his prize.

He carried the frame to his car and stowed it upright in the back seat, hoping the cobweb would survive the drive to Tucson. Then he walked back up the hill to release Jack Yeager.

The old man seemed to be sleeping, but as Nick bent over him he saw the thickening red line across his neck. For an instant it seemed like a nightmare, but then he realized it was all too real. While he'd carried the purloined cobweb to his car, someone had cut old Jack Yeager's throat.

Slightly more than two hours later Nick Velvet set the cobweb frame carefully on the desk of Canfield Drake's office and removed its plastic covering.

Drake smiled as he inspected his treasure. "Yes, that's the web, all right. I remember this lopsided center. You did fine work, Velvet. I have your money here."

Nick waited till he'd handed over the payment before he said, "There was a little trouble. A man named Yeager—"

"Damned old coot! Is he still around?"

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"You didn't tell me about him earlier."

"I was hoping you wouldn't run into him. He worked for the mining company in his youth, and he always claimed they cheated him out of his pay when they closed up fifty years ago. He went sort of crazy and decided finally that the mine and the town were his. I'd heard he was living up there, but when we didn't encounter him yesterday I was hoping he'd moved on."

"He won't be moving on," Nick said. "Somebody killed him."

"What's that?" Canfield Drake seemed genuinely startled. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly serious. While I was stealing the spider web somebody sneaked up and cut his throat. It may have been the occupant of a car that seemed to be following me. I searched the area, but the killer got away."

"Why would anyone kill old Yeager?"

"I don't know. I just hope the police don't try to blame me for it. It might be wise for me to catch an evening plane back east."

Drake hesitated and then said, "I was hoping you'd stay around for a day or two, Velvet. There's something else you can do for me."

"You want to hire me for another theft?"

"No, as a matter of fact quite the opposite. Tomorrow I'd like you to put this spider web back where you found it."

Nick simply stared at him. "You must be kidding."

"Not at all. I'm willing to pay you for it, though I assume that the return of property will not be as expensive as the original theft."

"I have no rates for returning property," Nick admitted. "I never had to do it before. Why did I steal it in the first place if you want it put back?"

"My motives needn't concern you. Leave the web here for now and pick it up tomorrow afternoon. Agreed?"

"What about Jack Yeager's body?"

"What about it?"

"The body is still up there, by the mine."

Drake thought for a moment. "Put the cobweb back up tomorrow afternoon. Then you can call the sheriff and report the body without giving your name."

"How much will you pay for this?"

"Another five thousand?"

"Ten."

"Oh, come now! Putting it back up won't be nearly as hard as taking it down. I could probably do it myself."

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"Fine," Nick said. "Do it. I'll catch the night plane."

"Wait a minute! All right, ten thousand, after you put the cobweb back."

Nick left the office smiling.

Downstairs he walked over to his rented car, noticing the desert dust that had collected on the fenders. He was thinking that he should get it washed after his final trip the next day. He reached out to unlock the car door when something hard jabbed him in the back.

"This here's a gun," Sara Kipling said close to his ear. "Get in the car and no tricks or I'll shoot you dead!"

After they'd driven a few blocks, with Sara in the seat behind him, Nick asked, "Where are we going? Am I being assaulted?"

"Fat chance of that! I'm taking you to see my father."

"Any special reason?"

"You're working for Canfield Drake, and he's up to something involving the old silver mine. I think he's trying to swindle my father."

Nick decided not to comment on that. "You followed me out there, didn't you?"

"I followed you part of the way, till I was sure where you were going."

"I see. Look, you'd better tell me where we're headed if you want me to drive us there."

"Left at the next traffic light and then pull into the parking lot on your right."

Nick followed her orders and then said, as they were getting out of the car, "You won't need the gun. Actually I'm quite interested in meeting your father."

"It's in my pocket. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'd be afraid to use it."

They entered a low single-story building that bore a sign announcing *Kipling Assets Corp.* The assets were apparently mineral, because chunks of ore decorated the reception area. A tall handsome man with a graying mustache was just coming out of the inner office and seemed surprised to see them. "Sara! What are you doing here?"

"Father, this is Nick Velvet, the man Drake hired."

Horace Kipling hesitated, perhaps sensing his daughter might have used force to bring Nick there. Finally he held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Velvet. Come on in."

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The inner office had been expensively furnished some years before, but now it was showing unmistakable signs of age and neglect. The chairs' leather upholstery was cracked and worn in spots, while a thin film of dust was visible on the bookshelves. "Your daughter seemed to think we should get together," Nick said.

Kipling eyed her uncertainly. "Sara can be a bit headstrong at times. She believes that Canfield Drake cheated me on a land deal some years back and she hates to see me go in on another venture with the man."

"Did he cheat you?" Nick asked.

"Not really. But it was the beginning of my declining fortunes."

"Your daughter is right in saying that I work for Drake, but my services are very specialized. I know nothing about the Expression Silver Mine, if that's the cause of your concern."

"Tell him about your deal with Drake," Sara suggested to her father. "If he doesn't know it already."

"Well, you probably know the silver mine shut down about fifty years ago and Expression became a ghost town. The mine was full of goaves—areas from which all the ore had been removed—and it was no longer a profitable operation. Now, as you know, the price of silver has skyrocketed. Canfield Drake approached me last month with a scheme to acquire the mine and put it back in operation."

"Have you been out there yet?" Nick asked casually.

"We took a ride out last week, but we didn't go inside. Drake had to get the key from the bank that holds the deed to the land. We're going to inspect it day after tomorrow."

"I see," Nick murmured. He was beginning to see a great many things. "What do you know about a man named Jack Yeager?"

"A sad case. A hermit of sorts who's been living in the ghost town, claiming he owns it. If the mine is reopened something would have to be done about him."

Something had already been done about him, Nick knew, but it wasn't yet time to put that thought into words. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"Why did Drake hire you?" Sara countered. "What were you doing out at the mine?"

"I wasn't out there stealing silver ore, if that's what you're thinking."

"That's exactly what I'm thinking. Drake wanted to clean out everything of value before my father got a look at it!"

Horace Kipling tried to calm his daughter. "Don't worry about

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that, Sara. When Drake and I were out there last week I noticed something that's better than the best burglar alarm in the world. Right across the mine entrance, over the padlocked door, is a big spider web. If that's gone, I'll know someone has been in the mine."

"Someone might enter the mine and the spider could spin another web."

He shook his head. "Not like this one. The shape of it is lopsided. I'll know if it's a different web."

Nick cleared his throat. "Mr. Kipling, with a gun-toting daughter like Sara I hardly think anyone would try to defraud you."

He shot a glance at his daughter and she took her hand from her pocket, showing a short piece of copper pipe. "I was just scaring him," she explained, "to get him here."

"My God, Sara! You could be arrested!"

"Don't worry," Nick said. "I won't press charges. But I do think I'll be going now."

"Out of Tucson, I hope," Sara Kipling said.

"Not for a day or two."

As he left the office she called after him, "If they find any bodies in the next couple of days, I'll know who's responsible."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Nick muttered under his breath.

The following day he returned to Canfield Drake's office at noon to pick up the spider-web frame. "You're right on time," Drake told him. "Take it out there and put it back in place."

"So you've finished your work in the mine?" Nick asked.

Drake shot him a startled glance. "What do you know about that?"

"Enough. You're stealing the silver ore from the mine before Horace Kipling gets a look at it."

Drake seemed to relax at Nick's words, and actually smiled. "Don't you worry about it. Just get the web back in place and I'll pay you."

"What about Yeager's body?"

"I didn't see any body," he said, and Nick couldn't tell if he was lying. "That old coot's probably still alive. Chances are he wandered off into the desert somewhere."

Nick picked up the frame. "All right. I'll be back late this afternoon."

The day was cooler and he seemed to make better time over the increasingly familiar desert roads. By the time he reached Expression again the sun had just started dipping in the western sky. He saw at once that Drake had told the truth about the body. It was

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no longer where Nick had left it. Either Drake or someone else had moved it. The mine door looked the same at first glance, but when he inspected the underside of the padlock he thought he detected a couple of fresh scratches such as a key might have made.

Nick worked as quickly as possible on the cobweb, first stripping the plastic poncho pieces from the sides of the frame, then positioning it against the locked portal of the mine shaft. He steadied it on some rocks to get it to the proper height, then began the tedious task of transferring the silken threads one at a time back to their original rock supports. Because the transparent tape might be noticed, he secured each supporting strand with a drop of clear adhesive.

Canfield Drake might have thought that returning the cobweb was a simpler task, but it took Nick twice as long to accomplish. Finally he stood back admiring his handiwork, and decided that even the original spider couldn't have done a better job. He removed the rocks, slid the wooden frame out from under the web, and as a last touch secured the bottom of the web to the ground with a filament of rubber cement that would pass all but the most careful inspection.

Then he carried the frame back to the car and drove off the way he had come.

Before returning to Drake for the balance of his money he drove to the university to return the spider-web frame to Professor Rittenhouse. He was prepared for the look of pain that crossed the professor's face at the sight of the missing glass.

"I think I owe you some money for a new frame," he said.

"Indeed you do! Luckily I have a spare I can use for my own experiments. What happened to it?"

"A little accident. Somebody didn't like my trespassing on their property."

"Did you get your web?"

"I got it."

"I thought you might bring it around for me to see."

"Sorry. I had other plans for it."

"Oh, well. I suppose I see enough of them in the course of a day." He took the frame from Nick and set it back in the corner. "I can get some glass to fix this up."

"Will fifty dollars cover it?"

"More than enough. I can't take that much from you."

But Nick insisted, and left the bill on Rittenhouse's desk. "Good

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luck with your spiders," he called out as he left.

"You too! Just be more careful of these frames next time someone's shooting at you!"

Nick returned to his car and was about to head back to Drake's office when he suddenly stopped and sat there in the center of the university parking lot.

He got out and walked back into the science building, back to Felix Rittenhouse's little office.

The professor looked up from his work, startled to see him.

"How did you know I'd been shot at?" Nick asked. "All I said was somebody didn't like my trespassing."

Rittenhouse started to answer, but then fell silent. "You didn't hear it from me and you certainly didn't hear it from a dead man. You must have been there yourself to see it. You must have been the one who was following me. You were interested in the spiders, and you knew which motel I was at. You even asked me on the phone when I was going after the web. You waited near the motel and followed me there, and then you found something much more profitable than spider webs, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were there, in hiding, when I tied up Jack Yeager. Unless we accept the unlikelihood of a second hidden observer, that means it was you who sneaked up and cut his throat. Want to tell me why?"

The professor's hand came off the desk, hurling a glass flask at Nick's head. Nick easily ducked it and came in low, toppling the bearded man backward off his chair. They hit the floor together, rolled over once in a tangle of arms and legs, and the fight was over almost as soon as it had begun.

"Get off me!" Rittenhouse gasped, struggling to get free.

"Not until you do some talking. You killed Yeager, didn't you?"

"I—it was an accident. I was going to cut him free and he saw the knife and jerked. I didn't mean to kill him."

"We'll see if a jury believes that. You don't use a knife to cut through leather straps when it's easier to untie them. When you saw I was taking the cobweb from the mine entrance you guessed there was a swindle afoot, didn't you? I think you decided to beat Drake into the mine and take the silver ore before he could. You thought I was gone when I headed back to the car, but Yeager was a witness so you killed him, knowing I'd be blamed. When I returned unexpectedly you had to hide. Is that about right?"

He twisted around beneath Nick, then relaxed. After a moment

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he started to talk. "You've got it all wrong. I was in that mine years ago, looking for spiders. There was no ore left. It was completely worked out. I knew Drake and Kipling were talking about reopening it, and when I followed you up there I guessed the whole scheme.

"You've got it backwards—Drake wasn't planning to steal any ore. He was going to salt the mine with a few chunks of silver ore to convince Kipling of its value. That's just what he did this morning, and I suppose you put the cobweb back in place this afternoon, so Kipling will swear no one entered the mine recently. But I had my camera along yesterday and I took pictures of everything. I figured I could blackmail you about Yeager's death and blackmail Drake about salting the mine. I've got it all on film, and it would serve Drake right. He's one of the university trustees who keeps me living close to poverty."

"Where's Yeager's body now?"

"Hidden in one of the buildings."

Nick stood up. "Suppose you tell all that to the sheriff."

It was later that afternoon when he returned to Drake's office. Before the man could speak, Nick said, "The sheriff's road patrol is on its way to the mine. Your salting scheme isn't going to work."

Canfield Drake gazed at him bleakly. "It doesn't matter now. The silver market is collapsing. I just had a call from my broker. Kipling won't put up any money now."

"I doubt if he had much left anyway. And this time his daughter might have killed you."

Drake merely shrugged and said, "I won't need you any more, Velvet. Catch the night plane back."

"I plan to, but I came for my money first. Ten thousand dollars for putting that lopsided cobweb back in place."

"I told you the whole deal fell through. The price of silver is almost back where it was last autumn. There's no more money for you."

Nick Velvet smiled. "I think you can find some, Drake, if you look real hard. I stopped you from being blackmailed a couple of hours ago, and that should be worth something."

"Blackmailed?" Canfield Drake asked, uncomprehending.

"Let me tell you all about it," Nick said.

"Q"

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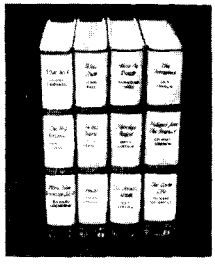

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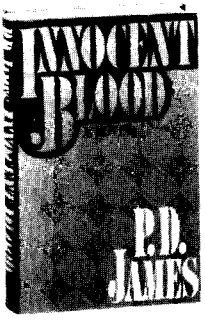

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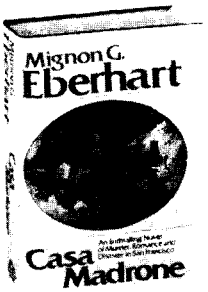

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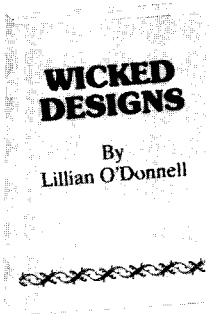

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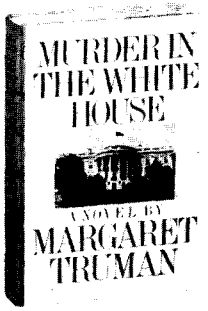

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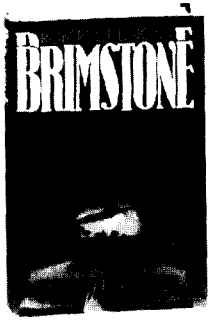

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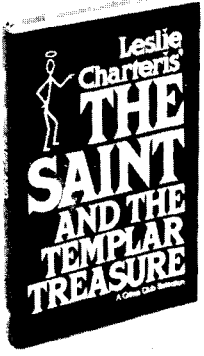

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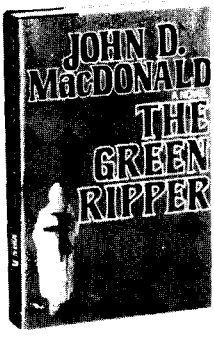

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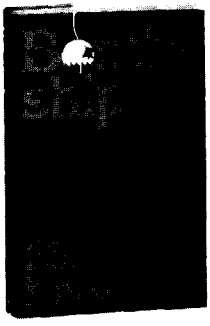

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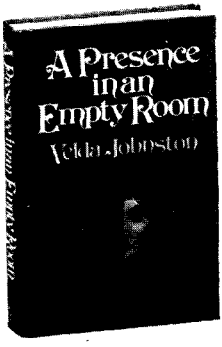

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